

# A world *of* gods

**Planting  
Churches in a  
Pluralistic World**

Gary Teja & Juan Wagenveld  
Editors

**Multiplication Network**

in partnership with

**Lausanne Church Planting Issue Network**

presents

# *A* world *of* gods

PLANTING CHURCHES IN A PLURALISTIC WORLD



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editors

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# Endorsements

As a trainer, professor, and practitioner of church planting and missiology, *A World of gods* should be on every church planter's short list of required reading. As global migration increases, scattering the peoples of the world, a fusion of cultural beliefs and religions have become more evident. With practical application, biblical insight, scholarly validation, and surveyed tenets of world religions, Gary Teja and Juan Wagenveld have produced an essential resource for global church planting. Thus, before heading into the harvest field, church planters would do well to consume this exceptional gift to the church.

**Rev. Matt Fretwell, D.Min.**  
**Assistant Professor**  
**Regent University School of Divinity**

I have not only read but also studied the manuscript with great interest and enthusiasm and gained a great deal of insights. Gary and Juan, together with their friends, have given the body of Christ, especially church planters, a masterful work that can be used as a manual for effective ministry. I believe *A World of gods* is a timely gift that inspires and equips Great Commission workers to understand the religious, cultural, and social contexts they have been sent to engage with evangelism and church planting. This is not a book you just read and then put it on the shelf, but it is a manual that you keep, study, and teach to others.

**Dr. Bekele Shanko**  
**Global Vice President, Campus Crusade for Christ (Cru)**  
**Founder & President, Global Alliance for Church Multiplication**

Having spent most of my teaching career as a theological educator in cross-cultural settings (Micronesia, Philippines, and Tonga, Polynesia), I consider *A World of gods* to be an excellent resource that thoroughly explains crucial topics that are typically overlooked or misunderstood—the topic/chapter on Animism in particular. As far as Animism is concerned, in my 38 years of theological education, the majority of my students were in one of two camps: 1) Wow! You really understand us! Or, 2) Are you nuts?! This book is relevant for folks in either camp, and everyone in between. I highly recommend this book to everyone brave enough to consider the worldview and experiences of others.

**Stephen G. Whatley**  
**Professor Emeritus of Apologetics & Theology**  
**Faith International University/Seminary (Tacoma WA)**

The grand story of the gospel that frames all of human history—creation, fall, redemption, restoration—is good news for every person in every culture. Building on this premise, the authors of each chapter present a particular religious worldview or cultural setting, then illustrate how to communicate the good news and to plant churches in that context. Combining sound theology and historical perspective with strategic insight, creative suggestions, and best practices, each chapter concludes with questions for application and discussion, along with additional resources. This book provides a valuable overview of religious contexts around the world, as well as very helpful counsel about how to approach individuals and to establish disciple-making communities in particular settings.

**David W. Bennett, D.Min., Ph.D.**  
**Global Associate Director for Collaboration and Content**  
**Lausanne Movement**

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*“Throughout history there have been many people who have wanted to be God. But there has only been one God willing to become human.” --Anonymous*

Multiplication Network trains church planters around the world — at the time of this writing in 2021, in over 50 nations on almost all the continents. We appreciate and respect the ministry leaders we partner with in each of those countries. Their comprehensive understanding of their own cultural and religious contexts is vital to the effective planting of new churches. What a joy it has been to learn from these faithful national leaders and church planters! Our own faith has grown and been challenged by the diverse perspectives developed within different cultural, linguistic and religious settings.

*A World of gods*, though carefully researched and written, is not primarily a scholarly book about comparative religions. Neither is it an in-depth study of mission contextualization issues. Rather, it is a primer on many basic religious contexts in which church planters do their work.

Each chapter was written by a practitioner who has experience in a particular context, and a second or even third subject-matter expert helped further refine each chapter’s content. Every chapter



begins with basic information about a specific religion, worldview, or culture and goes on to discuss issues and cultural details that church planters need to consider when establishing new communities of faith in that context — and the best practices that can help a church planter be more fruitful in that cultural environment.

It is our hope that this book will prove helpful to those who are evangelizing, discipling, starting new churches, and ministering in these diverse contexts.

We suggest you read it with others, and discuss it. We also recommend that you complement this reading with our book, *Planting Healthy Churches*. That volume goes deeper into the theology of mission and methods and models for church planting. It also addresses deeper contextualization approaches for the task. All of Multiplication Network's books and training materials can be found free of charge at [www.multiplicationnetwork.org](http://www.multiplicationnetwork.org).

We pray that God will use this book for fruitful learning and substantive conversations as well as for the continuing planting of healthy congregations across the globe.

Multiplication Network would like to thank the following Subject Matter Specialists who contributed valuable insights into specific chapters, utilizing their expertise in the subject:

- Pastor Arbin Pokhara
- Dr. Linda Gross
- Dr. Barbara Yandell
- Pastor Jeff Kran
- Dr. Jeff Stam
- Pastor Brett Werner
- Pastor Shyam Shrestha
- Dr. Stephen Kelley

We are indebted to two editors whose comments have made this a better finished product:

- Jane Bruin, Director, Center for Intercultural Student Development (CISD), Calvin University
- Ann Smith, Freelance consultant.

*Gary Teja & John Wagenveld*

*Editors*



# Understanding the Christian Story for Church Planters

*Todd Benkert and Juan Wagenvoeld*

The apostle Paul describes the gospel in the simplest of terms in 1 Corinthians 15: “that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures, and that he appeared” (1 Cor. 15:3b-5a ESV). Paul describes the Good News believed by all Christians in all times in these few words.

Paul’s formulation is indeed the gospel. It is missing nothing in its essence. But to a person who knows nothing of the God of the Bible and the biblical worldview, certain questions must be answered before the message makes sense and can be received as good news. Who is Christ? What is sin? Why is this death significant, much less his resurrection?

That message — the story of Jesus’ death, burial, and resurrection for sins — only makes sense when certain questions are answered. It can only be considered “good news” when considered against the backdrop of the whole story of human history and our relationship to our Creator. Before the reality in the phrase “Jesus died for our sins” can transform us, we must first understand in what way this proclamation is good news.

Paul’s phrase “in accordance with the Scriptures” indicates that there is a backstory that makes sense of this news and helps us understand how it truly is good. That backstory is recorded in the Bible. It tells us who we are, who God is, and what God is doing in the world. It tells us about God’s purpose, our need, and his provision to meet that need.

“Jesus died for our sins” is a simple sentence, but it raises all kinds of important questions for someone hearing the Christian message for the first time. Who is Jesus? Why did he have to die? What scriptures are we talking about and what do those scriptures say? Paul’s simple statement of the gospel does not sound simple at all to a person who has no prior knowledge of these things. Jesus’ death and resurrection only makes sense in the context of the story of God’s work in the world — and that story is the basis of the Christian worldview.

## WHAT IS WORLDVIEW?

One of the most important aspects of culture is worldview. Every culture — indeed, every person — has one. A *worldview* is the grid through which we interpret everything around us. Al Wolters defines worldview as “the comprehensive framework of one’s basic beliefs about things.”<sup>1</sup> Whenever we proclaim the gospel of Jesus Christ, we are making worldview statements and providing answers to the fundamental questions of life. What is the nature of the world around us? Where did we come from? What does it mean to be human? How do we know right from wrong? What happens when we die? What is the meaning of it all?<sup>2</sup>

Part of sharing the gospel story in any culture is making clear that we are sharing the Christian worldview that is revealed in Scrip-

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1 Albert M. Wolters, *Creation Regained: Biblical Basics for a Reformational Worldview*, 2nd ed. (2005), p. 2.

2 See James W. Sire, *The Universe Next Door*, 4th ed. (2004), p. 17. See also N. T. Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God* (1992), pp. 132-33.

ture. The Bible contains stories about how God has dealt with humanity—his promises to one family and nation of people through whom He would bless all nations. The Bible answers the key worldview questions that humans around the world ask. Each culture has its own worldview and stories that shape it. Part of the mission task is to proclaim the story of the one true, real, and present God and God's work in the world. There are many stories. The Christian story is both real and true, and it is a story for all times and for all people in every place.

From a secular perspective, Christianity represents a particular worldview among the many worldviews around the world that attempt to answer these basic questions so that the world makes sense. People approach these different worldviews in a variety of ways. Most people begin from a perspective of *ethnocentrism*—my worldview is the *right* one, the *normal* one—when they approach worldviews different from their own for the first time.

On another level, people move to a perspective of secular *relativism*. They approach the Christian worldview as one option among many for helping humans make sense of the world. They would say the Christian gospel is good news only in the sense that it helps certain people make sense of their world. In this view, religions generally—and Christianity specifically—are merely products of evolution and the human need for answers to these worldview questions. The more enlightened among us, they reason, do not need religion.<sup>3</sup> Of course, they still have a worldview even then, and it competes with all the other worldview possibilities.

This first chapter presents the Christian worldview and how the Bible answers basic worldview questions. It demonstrates how the larger comprehensive story of Scripture presents our universal spiritual need and how Christ is not only our hope, but the hope of the world. We present the backstory of Paul's "according to the Scrip-

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3 For a popular example, see Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion* (2006). For a survey of various evolutionary theories of religion, see James Dow, "Is Religion an Evolutionary Adaptation?" (2008).

tures” and provide the needed context so that “Christ died for our sins... Christ rose from the dead” can be received as good news when church planters proclaim this message throughout the world.

The apostle Paul was doing this very thing when he used the phrase “to an unknown God” as an opening for the gospel when speaking to the Athenians (Acts 17). He knew something of his audience’s worldview. Paul offered a challenge to their worldview assumptions, and then presented the biblical worldview, beginning with creation. He was challenging the notion of relative truth in doing so. The very reason for Paul sharing Christ with them is that the “gods” of this world—the worldviews of this world, and their assumptions—might be functional for operating in society, but they do not correspond to reality. Those other worldviews do not recognize the God who is there.<sup>4</sup> They do not account for the real problem of sin and the consequences of a fallen world. They do not present a story of the Creator’s amazing love for creation. Paul recognized that an approach that “any old worldview will do” has grave eternal and present consequences for those who remain ignorant and go through their lives without the joy of knowing new life in Christ. The true story of the world needed to be shared. As Paul shared this story, many believed, and those believers formed new communities of faith around that story.

## THE LARGER COMPREHENSIVE STORY OF SCRIPTURE—THE CHRISTIAN WORLDVIEW

When we read the Bible, the individual stories do not stand disconnected from the whole. They are part of God’s grand story. Each piece presents an illustration of the character and activity of God as that grand story plays out. While each particular plot and topic is anchored in a distinctive point in time and space, the themes resonate throughout the body of Scripture as the narrative looks back or looks ahead. As we read, the major themes of the Bible emerge.

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4 D. A. Carson, *The God Who Is There: Finding Your Place in God’s Story* (2010).

Universal worldview questions are answered as we understand the *grand story* of Scripture<sup>5</sup> — what Tim Keller calls “the story-arc of the Bible.”<sup>6</sup> That meta-narrative has traditionally been described as having four plot points: creation, fall, redemption, and re-creation. (Re-creation is also sometimes called restoration, consummation, or new creation.) This model of describing the Bible’s grand story is compelling because it specifically answers worldview questions and offers a structure for introducing the Christian story to people from other religious backgrounds.

Other major themes of Scripture (models of describing the biblical worldview) also help provide a fuller picture of what is happening in the Bible. No simple model can capture all the richness of the Bible’s story and capture its multi-faceted revelation of the person and works of God. However, particular themes, such as exodus or God’s Kingdom, may feature points of connection that can be helpful in sharing the gospel to specific cultures. Identifying themes and stories to which people from each culture can relate provides a contextual approach to sharing the good news of Jesus’ death and resurrection to bring salvation.

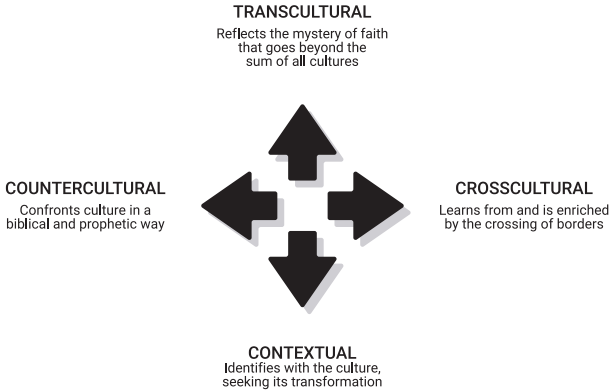
The Christian story will always find a way to be present (*to be*), enacted (*to do*) and told (*to say*) in any particular context. There are at least four dimensions to how the gospel story interacts with any given milieu or religious environment. The story has the capacity to be *contextual*, *cross-cultural*, *countercultural*, and *transcultural* all at the same time. The Christian message is for every nation, tribe, people, and language. Therefore, the story speaks into and addresses every culture.

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5 For a detailed description of the implications of the meta-narrative of Scripture for missions, see Bruce Riley Ashford and David P. Nelson, “The Story of Mission: The Grand Biblical Narrative,” chap. 1 in *Theology and Practice of Mission* (2011).

6 Tim Keller, “The Gospel in All Its Forms” (2008), p. 15.





The Christian Story in Relationship to the Local Culture

Let us turn now to the beginning of the story.

## *Creation*

Every worldview must answer the same question: “Where do we come from?” Church planters participating with God in starting new communities of faith need to be conversant with the basics of the origin of the Christian story. It should not trouble us that the Christian creation story bears some similarities to creation stories in other cultures. The creation of the world was a real event, and you would expect that event to have been shared across cultures—even if its details altered in the retelling.

### *The Genesis Story of Creation*

Much ink has been spilled explaining the first two chapters of Genesis and how the creation narratives correspond to science and human history. Whatever theories one wishes to employ as alternatives, the prime message of Genesis is that God created the world, and God’s creation is good. God is Creator. Every created thing is “from him and through him and to him” and for His glory (Rom. 11:36 ESV).

God made man and woman in His image as a reflection of His good character and for the purpose of His glory and provided the spaces and conditions for them to thrive. Think of it — the triune God, living as a perfect community of love and unity, decides to create a world in which humankind can flourish entering into a four-fold relationship: 1) with God, 2) with others, 3) with self, and 4) with creation. Human beings are the special creation of God, having been made in the “image of God.” This is unique among worldviews. Many ancient traditions understood that the gods created men to do their work for them, as slaves, but the Bible tells a very different story. It introduces God as someone who dignifies humans as image bearers who are vice-regents and stewards of God’s good creation and made for relationship and community.

So God created man in his own image,  
in the image of God he created him;  
male and female he created them.  
(Gen. 1:27 ESV)

### *Men and Women as Image Bearers of God*

Living as “image bearers” for Christians is a high calling and part of our human identity. Being human reflects the nature and character of God. In the Ancient Near East, when temples were constructed, the last thing to be brought in was the image of the deity that would be worshipped. As N. T. Wright points out in a 2020 lecture you can watch on YouTube (<https://bit.ly/3eRhNGV>), the world is God’s temple, and the last thing God brought into it is the *image bearer*, humankind. Both men and women are created in God’s image and every human being is an image bearer.



This has been a central part of Christian teaching for millennia, and it is a revolutionary notion that contrasts sharply with many worldviews around the globe. The church has not always lived out the implications of this teaching, but the Christian story recognizes

every person as an image bearer and calls us to treat every person with full dignity and Christian love. The implication for church planters is clear: every human being has the calling to reflect the image of the Creator.

Then God said, "Let us make mankind in our image, after our likeness..." (Gen. 1:26)

### *Men and Women Made for Community*

God is triune (Father, Son and Holy Spirit) and being created in God's image also has serious implications for community.

In the story, God says, "Let us..." The Triune God is the first and only perfect community. Being made in his image means, therefore, that human beings have been made *for* community. Early on God says that it is "not good for man to be alone (Gen. 2:18)." It is the first time that God, who made all things, says that something isn't quite right with His creation. The creation story is telling us right up front that in the same way that God is community, humans will better reflect his image when we are in community.

This becomes an incredibly powerful reality for church planting contexts. The planter knows that every human being has a need for relationship. This need will be fulfilled through marriage, small groups, shared meals, hospitality in homes, corporate worship, and many other ways in which newly planted communities of faith help individuals fulfill their innate calling to fellowship and relationship. The gospel has the amazing capacity to fulfill this need in people as new communities of faith are called forth by the One who created them for community.

And God blessed them. And God said to them, “Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it, and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over every living thing that moves on the earth.” (Gen. 1:28 ESV)

### *Men and Women Made to Reflect God's Glory into the World*

There is another aspect to being image bearers of the Creator God. In addition to respecting every human being and knowing that people are made for community, we also must understand that each of us has a calling to be true to our vocation. To be human is to be blessed by God and asked to participate in subduing the earth and having dominion over it. By this we understand all aspects of “participating in the making of culture.”

The word *culture* is derived from the same root as the word *cultivating*. God puts people in a garden that they can enjoy and which they need to tend. There is good work for them to do (Gen. 2:15). For example, God makes the animals — but He gives man the task of naming them. From the very beginning, God is inviting human participation in the care of creation. Adam and Eve are told to be fruitful and to multiply.

This is part of what is sometimes referred to as the Cultural Mandate. This participation is part of man's call to worship God in all areas of life. James K. A. Smith says it like this: “It is a call to be(come) *human*, to take up the vocation of being fully and authentically human, and to be a community and people who image God to the world.”<sup>7</sup> To paraphrase a beautiful metaphor that biblical scholar N. T. Wright uses in his lectures, reflecting the image of God does not only mean reflecting it back to God as a mirror would do — it also includes the sense of reflecting the image of God as a prism. This prism reflects the full spectrum of God's light and his care into

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<sup>7</sup> James K. A. Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom: Worship, Worldview, and Cultural Formation* (2009), pp. 162-63.

all of creation, and then gathers the praises in creation and reflects them back to God.

### *All of Creation Points to the Creator*

Human beings are the pinnacle of creation with all creation pointing to the Creator and revealing God's nature and character. There is a God and that God is good. Creation is the beginning of the gospel message. Even before we go out as witnesses to the world (Acts 1:8), creation itself is the first witness; everything that God has created proclaims the glory of God.

The heavens declare the glory of God;  
 the skies proclaim the work of his hands.  
 Day after day they pour forth speech;  
 night after night they reveal knowledge.  
 They have no speech, they use no words;  
 no sound is heard from them.  
 Yet their voice[b] goes out into all the earth,  
 their words to the ends of the world. (Ps. 19:1-4)

Paul, in his letter to the Romans, reminds the Roman believers of this witness of creation. "For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities — his eternal power and divine nature — have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made" (Rom. 1:20). In Acts 17, we see Paul confronting the idolatrous worldview of the Athenians. In his contextualization of the gospel, he begins with creation. "The God who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of heaven and earth ... he himself gives everyone life and breath and everything else" (Acts 17:24-25).

The foundation for the Christian worldview is God as Creator, and creation is the starting point for the gospel. "In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth."

## *The Fall*

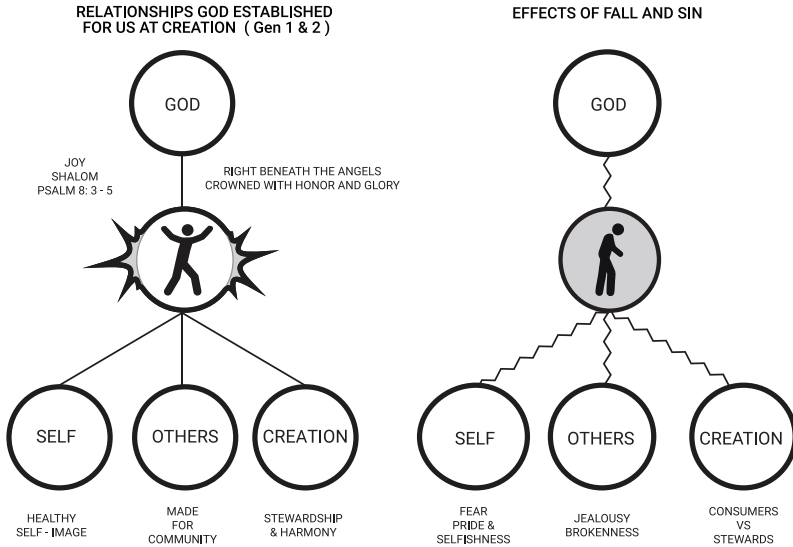
Despite the witness of creation and humans as God's image bearers, every worldview must come to grips with the reality that something is not right in the world. The presence of evil in human existence points to the fact that something is broken, distorted, and corrupted. The Bible explains that the origin of this brokenness is human sin.

God placed Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden to care for it. They were free to enjoy all the fruits of God's creation, with only one restriction. "But you must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat from it you will certainly die" (Gen. 1:27). In Genesis 3, we read of the events that caused the fall of mankind and brought sin into the world. The serpent (the devil, a fallen angel) deceives Eve and leads her to disobey God and eat from the forbidden tree. She gives the fruit to Adam and he too eats of the forbidden tree. Immediately, the Bible tells us, their eyes are opened, they realize they are naked, and so they hide from God.

God comes looking for them and we hear the first question in the Bible as God asks: "Where are you?" God is already looking to restore the relationship. For their own good, God needs to banish them from the garden, but He also speaks honestly to them about the curse that comes with the disobedience. In an act of grace and mercy God dresses them with animal skins (the first spilling of blood) as he sends them out of the garden. "The Fall" refers to this first sin and its consequences.

The Christian story is quite direct about naming this reality. It comes in many different shapes and forms: wickedness, rebellion, idolatry, disobedience, with sin leading to guilt, fear, shame, hate, and resentment. Sin enters the world through the work of Satan, who tempted man and woman into evil. Adam and Eve did not resist the temptation, and since that moment all mankind has been tainted by sin. This original sin permeates every relationship and

distorts all manner of things in God's good creation. The four relationships that were meant to allow for human flourishing are now distorted and broken.



Adapted from:

2004 Christian Economic Development Chalmers Economic Development Institute , Section 2, p .15.

The Christian Scriptures present the all-encompassing effect of the Fall. Its influence affects every area of life and every aspect of creation. Tim Koster describes the messed-up world this way<sup>8</sup>:

Parts are missing, parts are bent, and parts are broken. Relationships are strained and even disrupted between us as human beings (divorce, crime, competition, jealousy, war), between us and God (feelings of guilt, shame, and lack of purpose or meaning), and us and creation (pollution, global warming, natural disasters). It is fairly easy for us all to agree that this is not life the way it ought to be.

8 Tim Koster and John Wagenveld, *Take Your Church's Pulse: 10 Vital Signs of a Healthy Church* (2014), p. 107.

Add to that our relationship to ourselves (unhealthy self-image, greed, selfishness, arrogance, fear, addictions) and one starts to understand just how pervasive the effects of sin are on the human condition.

Sin dehumanizes. It takes away from the life God intended for us. It further breaks and distorts all our relationships, tearing at the fabric of our lives. Sin gives us a warped view of reality and infects our perspective on the world. It is usually tied to some form of idolatry. Anything that takes priority over God or that displaces Him is the idol that we value more. Assigning higher worth to something other than God is idolatry.

According to St. Augustine, sin is disordered love. We are made to love, but that love gets misdirected and disordered because of brokenness and sin. This sin can be personal (individual responsibility) but also systemic (corporate and structural).

Part of the Christian story is that those who want to be in right relationship with God need to confess their sins and shortcomings. As Smith writes<sup>9</sup>,

We confess not only personal or private sins and transgressions; the moment of confessions owns up to our complicity with all sorts of evil that disorders the world and corrupts creation. In short, we humans confess our failure to heed the call to be human, to be God's image bearers to and for the world. As a result, sin is not only personal and individual (a violation of a relationship); it also becomes inscribed into the cultural institutions of our human making (a refusal of our commission to be God's vice-regents).

It goes without saying that a proper understanding of the basic outline of the Christian story is immensely helpful in sharing the gospel. Perhaps less obvious is that church planters also need to

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9 Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom*, p. 178.



understand human nature and the devastation caused by sin and brokenness. They need to understand that they must have a basic understanding of *theology* (the study of God) and of the biblical view of *anthropology* (the study of man).

An interesting dimension of our human condition is that we are able to imagine a world without this brokenness. Many people have a sense that at some time in the past, it must not have been this way — or that someday it will not. The Christian story believes both of these things are true. They were true at the very beginning of creation. Redemption has come in Jesus Christ, who is “making all things new” (Rev. 21:5 ESV) and will someday set everything right. Tim Keller writes: “The Gospel is the good news that God has accomplished our salvation for us through Christ in order to bring us into right relationship with him and eventually to destroy all the results of sin in the world.”<sup>10</sup> Let us now turn to that part of the story.

### *Redemption*

The Fall answers the question “What is wrong?” Redemption answers the question “What is the solution?”<sup>11</sup>

The effect of the Fall is all-pervasive, so the redemption Jesus brings must be all-encompassing. In its broadest sense, redemption impacts everything ruined by sin. Redemption comes through the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. This is the heart of the gospel message: “that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures” (1 Cor. 15:3b-4). The Christian story has its climax and center in the person and work of Jesus Christ. Without Jesus, there is no redemption and the Christian faith has no story.

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<sup>10</sup> Tim Keller, *Center Church: Doing Balanced, Gospel-Center Ministry in Your City* (2012), 31.

<sup>11</sup> Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God*, pp. 132-33.

The theme of redemption does not appear out of nowhere, however. Redemption is promised from the early chapters of Genesis and through the entire narrative of the Old Testament, looking ahead to what God would do in Christ Jesus. Christians believe that the fulfillment of the Old Testament promises comes through Jesus. And through those promises, the Christ would redeem what was distorted by the fall and by our sin.

There are many promises and pictures of redemption in the Old Testament, and there is not enough room in this introductory chapter to explore the depth of them and how they have been and will be fulfilled. But there is room for a brief survey of some of these overlapping themes and how Christ fulfills the promises of Scripture and redeems what was broken at the Fall.

God redeemed humanity by sending his Son to live, die, and rise again. This work of Jesus begins with his incarnation. The miracle of the incarnation is that God became one of us, “being made in human likeness” (Phil 2:7). Though all creation was tainted by the Fall, God did not stay distant from his creation, but entered into it! The Gospel of John puts it this way: “The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth” (John 1:14). Through his incarnation, life, death, and resurrection, Jesus brought the redemption promised since the time of the Fall.

Even within the passage in Genesis 3 about the Fall we can see evidence of the grace of God toward sinners and the promise of redemption. Though sin had revealed Adam’s and Eve’s nakedness before God, the Lord covered their nakedness with animal skins — the first sacrifice (Gen 3:21). Even as God declared the consequences of sin on the serpent, he gave the first promise of the One who would come to defeat sin and death itself (Gen 3:15).

For since death came through a man, the resurrection of the dead comes also through a man. For as in Adam all die, so in Christ all will be made alive.  
(1 Cor. 15:21-22; see also Rom. 5:12-19)

Later, God would give his people the Law through Moses. The law of Moses provided the hope of redemption by making temporary provision for sin through its system of offerings and sacrifices, especially the sacrifice of atonement. At the cross, Jesus became the eternal sacrifice, once and for all, redeeming us from sin and its consequences.

Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us. (Gal. 3:13)

The Old Testament law identified the ways in which God's people were to walk in righteousness before God. Jesus was able to fulfill all righteousness through his sinless life. He fulfilled the "righteous requirements of the law" and redeemed us from the curse of sin. Where sin brought separation and the curse of death, Jesus' death and resurrection brought reconciliation and redemption. We are made right with God not by our own righteousness but by grace, through faith in Jesus.

God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God. (2 Cor. 5:21)

In Jesus' final post-resurrection appearance, he told his disciples that they would receive power when the Holy Spirit came upon them, and they would be his witnesses to the uttermost part of the earth. Acts 2 tells of the day of Pentecost, when that promise was fulfilled — yet another picture of redemption. In Genesis 11, as a consequence of the people's sin and disobedience, "the LORD con-

fused the language of the whole world. From there the LORD scattered them over the face of the whole earth” (Gen 11:9). One people became many peoples in that moment. But after his resurrection, even the curse of Babel was reversed. At Pentecost, the Holy Spirit was poured out and the confusion of languages was redeemed as “they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit gave them utterance” (Acts 2:4). The peoples who had been scattered would be brought back to God as disciples of Jesus, filled with the Holy Spirit, and as witnesses of the risen Christ “to the end of the earth” (Acts 1:8).

Jesus had commissioned his followers to make disciples of all the nations. This “Great Commission” was itself an act of redemption, for here Jesus redeemed the very purpose for which we were created. His death and resurrection restored the relationship broken at the Fall — and Jesus’ sending of us restores our purpose to fulfill our mission to fill the earth with worship as one people of God.<sup>12</sup>

Finally, Jesus redeems a people for himself. In the book of Exodus, God worked powerfully through Moses to redeem Abraham’s descendants. Israel would be God’s chosen people who would worship the one true God. Later the prophet Isaiah would speak of a new exodus. The suffering servant would bear the sins of the people and Israel would fulfill the promise given to Abraham that all the nations would be blessed in him (Gen 12:3). Israel would finally fulfill its role to be “a light to the nations” as God redeemed a people for Himself in Christ. Jesus, who in His human lineage was a descendent of Abraham, would bring salvation to all the peoples of the world. Thus, another aspect of Jesus’ redemption was to call out a people for Himself, consisting of both Jews and Gentiles.

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12 George Robinson, “The Gospel and Evangelism”, in *Theology and Practice of Mission: God, the Church, and the Nations*, ed. Bruce Ashford (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2011), 76-91

But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's special possession, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light.  
(1 Pet. 2:9)

Similarly, when Jesus was announcing the good news of the kingdom (Matt. 6:33), He was announcing the redemption of the Davidic kingdom and fulfilling the messianic promises of the Old Testament. This one "in the lineage of David" would establish an eternal kingdom made up of both Jews and Gentiles.

Throughout the book of Acts, we see the disciples — and, prominently, the apostle Paul — proclaim the Good News of the Kingdom by announcing that Jesus is Lord and that God had indeed raised Him from the dead (Rom. 10:10). Communities of faith were born all over Asia Minor (modern day Turkey) and in Europe. Lesslie Newbigin, the British missiologist, notes that "the center of Jesus' concern was the calling and binding to himself a living community of men and women who would be the witnesses of what he did."<sup>13</sup> Jesus was redeeming a people for Himself.

### *Restoration or New Creation*

The Scriptures provide a clear ending to the story. Both the Old Testament and the New Testament present a clear, inspiring vision of what can be expected as the end of the whole Christian story. It is an ending that should provide much consolation, joy, and hope to the follower of Christ. There are many disagreements about how, exactly, that ending is coming about, but there is significant agreement on this part: Christ will come back to earth as King, ushering in a new time in which all things will finally be made right. Let us look at two key passages that describe this, one from the Old Testament and one from the New.

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<sup>13</sup> Lesslie Newbigin, *Open Secret: An Introduction to the Theology of Mission* (1978), p. 52.

In Isaiah 65:17-18a (ESV), the prophet speaks for God when he says, “See, I will create new heavens and a new earth. The former things will not be remembered, nor will they come to mind. But be glad and rejoice in what I will create.” The rest of the passage provides two powerful metaphors that describe a state of justice (people will build their own homes and live in them, and plant vineyards and enjoy its fruit) and a state of peace (the wolf and the lamb will feed together). Isaiah provides a compelling vision of the new heavens and the new earth that God will bring about. The prophet tells us to be glad and rejoice. This is good news — hopeful news.

In Revelation 21:1-5 (ESV), John writes about the vision he has on the island of Patmos:

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, “Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God. He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away.” And he who was seated on the throne said, “Behold, I am making all things new.” Also he said, “Write this down, for these words are trustworthy and true.”

This passage aligns so well with the image that Isaiah presented centuries before. It is a beautiful picture of the world fully restored, reclaimed, and made right. The effects of sin and every expression of death are gone. All relationships are aligned with the wonderful love of Christ. What was once deformed and broken is healed and fully restored to its original intent.

Because this passage from Revelation 21 is so critical to our understanding of the end of the story (often referred to as *eschatology*), we will make a few comments about it.

- *John has a vision.* This vision is important for all church planters (and all Christians) to incorporate into their own theological imagination. This is the next to last chapter in the Bible, so the biblical story is about to close — and we are being invited to understand some important aspects of the ending.
- *There is a new heaven and a new earth in this vision.* Some people think that means God will replace the existing earth and heaven, while some others think it means that the world will be fully *restored*. Christian scholars probably will continue to debate that. But most of them agree that the vision indicates some level of continuity; God will not share his glory with the enemy and let the devil ruin his creation project.

The New Testament uses two different Greek words that English translations of the Bible translate as *new*. The one used in this Revelation passage is the one that means “restoring,” not the one that means “replacing.” In the same way that the earth was “destroyed” during the flood by water, but was not annihilated, the world will go through a refining fire at the end of time and be fully restored. God will fully redeem, reclaim, and restore it. It is this world he is restoring, not another place that He had in mind as “plan B.”

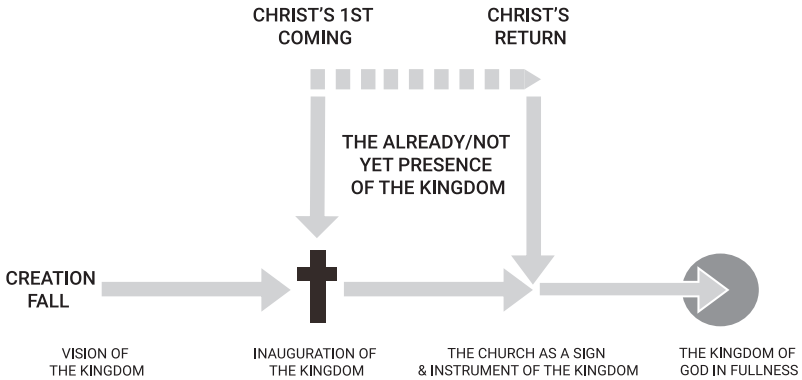
- *“There will no longer be any sea”* (Rev. 21:1) may seem like a puzzling detail. However, most interpreters of Scripture don’t assume this means that there will not be any body of water in the new creation. At the time John wrote the book, many cultures — including the Hebrew mindset — thought of the sea as a place of chaos and disorder. It is where sins are cast away and where marine monsters live. It stands for evil and tumultuousness. In this sense, the new creation will have won over the chaos of the sea. It will no longer be a source of fear or anguish.

- *The New Jerusalem comes down from heaven.* Contrary to what some Christians believe — that the end of the game is about “going up to heaven” — the Christian story ends with heaven coming down to earth. Some segments of the Church have been driving in the wrong direction when it comes to this eschatological perspective. Just as Christ came down to earth in the incarnation, so he will do again at the end of time in what Christians call the Second Coming.
- *God and man will dwell together.* Christians believe that through the presence of the Holy Spirit God is already present in our midst, and at the end of time this will be intensified in full communion. That fellowship will be marked by the restoration of heaven and earth into a place where there will be no more pain, suffering, or death.
- *“I am making all things new.”* Jesus, seated on the throne, says that he is making *all* things new. That statement does not leave out any aspect of life or creation — all things will be made new. It does not speak about it in past tense, as if it were already done, nor in future tense, as something that is hopeless at the present. The language conveys that something has already begun, and will continue to be happening until it is all complete. This is traditionally referred to as “the already, but not yet” nature of the Kingdom. The Kingdom is already here in our midst but is not yet fully consummated. The church lives in mission between the times of the “already, but not yet” nature of the Kingdom.

### *The “Already, But Not Yet” Nature of the Kingdom*

It is essential for church planters to understand this end game. Why are we bearing witness to the gospel? Why are we making disciples? And why are we planting churches? The work can be so difficult and sometimes very frustrating. Understanding why one is participating in the work for the gospel is critical.





Much of it has to do with comprehending the final chapter of the great story. Restoration — or re-creation — is our future hope, and it has implications for the present. It is the story already told, but yet to unfold. It is the story of our promised future with God. Not only is it inspiring and motivating, but it also will help church planters with one of the areas (New Creation/Restoration) that is least taught about in some Christian circles or is often coopted by other world views that distort this part of the story.

The church planter knows that planting churches is not only one of the most strategic ways to further the cause of the gospel — which it is— but that a new church is also an outpost of the Kingdom of God, and is also participating with God in the renewal of all things. The Great Commandment (to love our neighbors as ourselves) and The Great Commission (to make disciples of all nations) are practiced out of healthy, “making all things new” congregations that understand their identity and vocation in the Kingdom.

When an agricultural development organization or university wants to introduce a new seed into a particular country, it will do all it can to educate farmers and promote the new high-yield seed. But oftentimes the farmers are not interested in departing from the old ways that they have been using. At that point the promoters will purchase some land on key byways and plant the seed themselves.

When the farmers in the region see these “demonstration plots” and taste for themselves the amazing results of the seed and the good crop that it yields, they become enthusiastic. They begin to adopt the new seed. Within a few years, many will have switched to planting the new seed.

The local church is like a demonstration plot of the values and realities of the Kingdom of God. Communities of faith demonstrate to an unbelieving world what it is like when Jesus reigns over the lives of the community. It becomes evident through the faith, hope, and love exhibited by those transformed by the power of the gospel.

Newbigin says that the church is “a sign, instrument and foretaste of the Kingdom.”<sup>14</sup> It is a *sign* in that it points to something larger than itself. It points to Jesus, who is making all things new. It points to the Kingdom of God, the redemptive reign and rule of God over all creation in Jesus Christ. The church is also an *instrument* that God can use in the transformation of the world in the power of the Holy Spirit. The church also serves as a *foretaste* of the coming Kingdom of God. Scripture speaks of the final banquet — we don’t have the full meal yet, but we do act as a foretaste of that which is to come. One of the great sacraments or ordinances of the Christian faith is the Lord’s Supper in which we look back, remembering what Christ did for us, but also look forward in anticipation of Christ’s return.

The church acts and serves in light of the future kingdom. It anticipates with hope and joy that preferred future, and this energizes it for the present. We attempt to make real now what someday will be totally true of us and the world. The church loops the future back into the present, participating with God in what only God can do — transform the world.

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14 Newbigin, *Open Secret*, p. 52.

Smith writes<sup>15</sup>,

...We are called and formed to be a people of expectancy — looking for the coming (again) of the Messiah. We are a futural people who will not seek to escape the present, but will always sit somewhat uneasy in the present, haunted by the brokenness of the “now.” The future we hope for — a future when justice rolls down like waters and righteousness like an ever flowing stream — hangs over our present and gives us a vision of what to work for in the here and now as we continue to pray, “Your kingdom come.”

One of the distortions that has come into the story is the belief by many Christians that the whole idea of being a Christian is about “going to heaven.” With philosophical origins in Neoplatonism, many have been taught that following Christ is a way of assuring them of going to heaven and avoiding hell when they die. Usually this is accompanied by language that this world “is not our home.” Understanding the biblical arc or comprehensive plot we present in this chapter makes it clear that the biblical story points to God making the earth so that it would indeed be the appropriate home for humans — but not as it is now.

Because of the Fall described above, it needs redemption, restoration, and to be made new. The Christian life is not about going to heaven when we die; it is about being made a new creation “in Christ,” who is transforming this world and will someday collapse heaven and earth into the perfect place for God and man to dwell together. When we die we indeed go into the presence of the Lord, but this is considered the intermediate space. As Christians we believe that at the final resurrection we will all live in the new heaven and new earth where the redeemed will flourish. Let’s be clear: that is the end game.

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15 Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom*, p. 157.

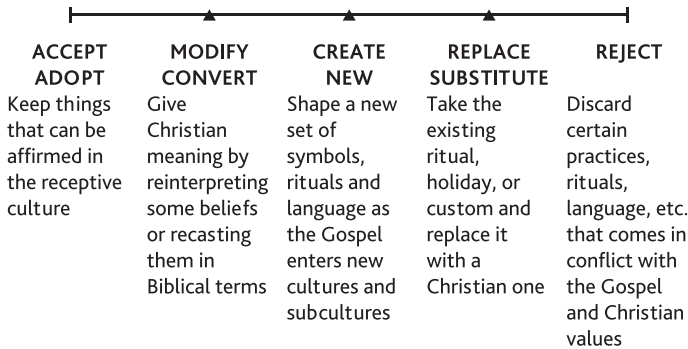
A proper understanding of this part of the story has implications for the Church today. Church planters, like all Christians, can be motivated by the understanding that Jesus wants us to represent the interests of heaven on earth. He taught his disciples and us to pray: “Your Kingdom come, Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.” Heaven is the place of instruction; earth is the place of implementation.

That is why Paul, the consummate church planter, wrote to the church in Philippi: They are citizens of heaven (Phil. 3:20). Even as citizens of an imperial city, the early believers in Philippi were already considered citizens of heaven. Think, too, about what Paul told the believers in Corinth (and believers around the world in the 21st century): “In Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation. Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ” (2 Cor. 5:19-20 ESV). An ambassador represents the interests of one kingdom to another. As ambassadors, we represent the values of the Kingdom of God on earth. It is this world that He is transforming, redeeming, and reconciling to Himself.

## ALTERNATIVES WHEN WORKING IN DIFFERENT RELIGIOUS CONTEXTS

Different religions have competing truth claims, and different ways of expressing them. Some try *syncretism* (the mixing together of different religions) in an attempt to harmonize different perspectives and worldviews. Others use *apologetics* (the defense or reasoned explanations of religious doctrines) to compare and contrast competing claims and argue persuasively for their particular point of view. This chapter lays out one common way to tell the Christian story — the framework of creation, fall, redemption, and restoration.

Communicating the gospel to different audiences in ways they can grasp is the work of *contextualization* in the field of missions (how the Gospel and culture relate to each other in different places). We have written about that elsewhere.<sup>16</sup> Church planters will always need to discern how to tell and live out the Christian story in the midst of whatever cultural and religious context they are serving in as an ambassador of Christ. One of the great advantages of national leaders reaching their own people is that this discernment process is accelerated and comes more naturally. There are a number of alternatives available to a church planter entering a new community or working within a particular religious group, and the graphic below presents some of them.



Source: Doctoral class with Paul Hiebert, Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, Feb 2002.

## CONCLUSION: A FINAL WORD

Jesus says in the gospels: “Follow me!” If someone came up to you on the street and said, “Follow me!” you would probably have lots of questions: “Who are you?” “Why should I follow you?” and “Where are we going”? Every church planter will hear those questions, and we explored in this chapter some answers to them, and their implications for church planters.

16 Todd Benkert, Gary Teja, and Blayne Waltrip, “Contextualization Issues in Church Planting,” chap. 9 in *Planting Healthy Churches* (2015).

The other chapters in this book share insights about a variety of religious and philosophical contexts in which many church planters are actively sharing the gospel and gathering those who will follow Jesus. They are starting small communities of faith that live into their identity as Christ followers and live out their vocation as citizens of the Kingdom, reclaiming this world for Christ in all areas of life.

These communities of faith are evangelizing, discipling, and starting small group Bible studies. They are gathering for worship, praying, caring for people, training leaders, and equipping the congregation for Christian life and witness. They are loving their neighbors and serving their context in the name of Jesus as the salt and light of the gospel. Thousands and thousands of these new outposts of the Kingdom are being established each year throughout the world. It is our fervent hope and prayer that some of the chapters that follow will help you tell the Christian story more effectively according to the context of your audience.

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What is the basic structure presented in this chapter as the arc or meta-narrative of Scripture?
2. Which area do you feel you need to reinforce more in your own life and ministry?
3. What is the danger in over-emphasizing an otherworldly approach that focuses on “going to heaven” as the chief end of the Christian life?
4. What are we saved “from”? What are we saved “for”?
5. How much continuity and/or discontinuity do you think there is between the world as it is and the world as it will someday be in the new creation?

## PERSONAL NOTES

*Please use this space for writing your own reflection or a prayer regarding the content of this chapter.*

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# Church Planting in the Context of Secularism/ Postmodernism

*Michael Binder and Craig Van Gelder*

## INTRODUCTION

“You are the first generation to be raised without religion.”<sup>1</sup> This is articulated by the mother of the main character to her son in Douglas Copeland's book *Life After God* (1994). She is describing the generation known as “Generation X”—persons born in North America between 1965 and 1979. Their parents' generation, the baby boomers born between the mid-1950s and mid-1960s, left the church in greater numbers than any previous generation and returned in fewer, which significantly influenced the decline that many denominations experienced beginning in the mid-1960s. This turning away from institutional Christianity, however, was only part of a much more pervasive shift that was taking place in the culture, which by the 1990s was being referred to as the “emerging postmodern condition.”<sup>2</sup>

Generation X became representative of what is known as the “do-nes”—those who no longer feel a need for institutional Christianity

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1 Douglas Copeland, *Life After God* (1995).

2 David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity: An Inquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change* (1991).

and the organized church in their daily lives. The "dones" have been joined by many in the succeeding generations—the Millennials born between 1980 and 1994 (who are also referred to as Generation Y), and the still emerging Generation Z (born between 1995 and 2010). Recent surveys of people in these generations have found significant increases of those who have never even considered participating in organized Christianity. They register their perspective as "none" when asked about their personal religious preference. It is important to note that the younger the generation, the higher the proportion of "dones" and "nones." A 2015 Gallup poll found that at least 31% in the Gen Z cohort fall into this group, compared to 23% of Millennials and only 6% of those in Gen X.<sup>3</sup>

Expression of a commitment to the church—or even recognition of a need for institutional Christianity—is clearly in decline today within these emerging generations and is accelerating among those who are younger. At the same time that this shift away from the institutional church is taking place, there has been a resurgence in personal spirituality. Sociologists Christian Smith and Melinda Lundquist Denton call this type of spirituality "moralistic therapeutic deism" in their book *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers* (2005).<sup>4</sup> This view represents a turning inward to oneself as the only authoritative source for moral decision-making. Referring to this shift as the "emerging postmodern condition" has fallen out of vogue over the past several decades. Increasingly, it is referred to as "secularism," an older term that deserves some attention and unpacking.

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3 Frank Newport, "Percentage of Christians in U.S. Drifting Down, but Still High" (2015), <https://news.gallup.com/poll/18795/percentage-christians-drifting-down-high.aspx>

4 Christian Smith with Melinda Lundquist Denton, *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers* (2009).

## SECULARISM

How did the worldview described above emerge? How is it that individuals no longer even conceive of the possibility that an outside authority exists to help them make personal moral choices? The fall of the *God-hypothesis* in North America is quite remarkable. This hypothesis holds to a *transcendent* view of belief in a God who actively acts within this world. More and more, this view is being replaced by an *immanent* frame in which persons believe that the only reality that exists is the one we encounter around us. Contemporary Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor discusses this shift in his important book *A Secular Age* (2007), noting that it has occurred in the last half century. Gallup reports that over the last half century in the U.S. there has been a change in perspective. In the 1950s, about only 2% of Americans did not have a membership in a church.<sup>5</sup> Now, an increasing number of people consider it not only easy to not believe in God, but even inescapable. Taylor calls this secular worldview “expressive individualism” and identifies it as the emergence of a dramatically revised *social imaginary*.<sup>6</sup> An *imaginary* is the tacit (unconscious) acceptance of a way of seeing the world that is assumed to just be the way things actually are. Taylor explains the historical process that unfolded over the past centuries that led to the current social imaginary in terms of three phases, which he calls Secular<sub>1</sub>, Secular<sub>2</sub> and Secular<sub>3</sub>. It is important to distinguish between these three types of secular.

### *Secular<sub>1</sub>*

Secular<sub>1</sub> is the social imaginary that developed during the Middle Ages (from the fifth century to the fifteenth). Over that thousand-year period, the God-hypothesis was pervasive in all of life. The state sanctioned and established the church — and the church, in turn, supported the state. All of society was ordered and viewed as existing within a religious framework that accepted that God is

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5 Newport, Frank. “In U.S., Increasing Number Have No Religious Identity.”

6 Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (2007), p. 146.

present and active in the world. People believed that the natural world was grounded in a heavenly reality, which is sometimes called the *Christendom worldview*. People understood the world as a place where the eternal and temporal met and co-existed, and where what Taylor calls “extra-human agencies” — spirits, demons, and cosmic forces — resided and operated on and through people’s lives. Conceiving of God as being transcendent was viewed as *normal*.<sup>7</sup>

This understanding enabled the church to exercise uncontested authority over every domain of life — even over people who did not believe in God, since their lives were still being shaped by the God-hypothesis of the dominant culture. Very few people challenged this social imaginary that assumed an unproblematic belief in God and an inseparable link between religious life and life in one’s society.

This worldview that embraced a close inter-relationship of the church and the state is often referred to as “Constantinian Christendom,” after the Roman Emperor Constantine, who formally established state support for the Catholic Church in the fourth century. In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, Europeans transported this system of thought to the Americas in various European strains of Christianity. In Latin America, it was the Catholic Church that was established, while in Canada the Anglican Church was established. The Anglican Church was also active in the colonies that eventually became the United States, especially in the southern colonies where it was established for a time in the 1700s. This pattern was replicated in several northern colonies (in the area now known as New England) by the Congregational Church (the Puritans). Members of other sectarian groups such as Baptists, Mennonites, and Quakers, which had broken away from established churches in England and on the European continent, also immigrated to North America and settled mostly within the middle colonies (around what is now Philadelphia, Washington D.C., and Virginia).

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7 Taylor, *A Secular Age*, p. 30.

In the aftermath of the Revolutionary War, in the newly formed United States freedom of choice regarding religious beliefs became the accepted norm, and with that came the separation of the church from the state. But the legacy of a Christendom expectation that the church was to play a major role in shaping society led to the unofficial formation in the 1800s of what might be called a “churched culture” in the U.S. — and more specifically, a Protestant one.<sup>8</sup> This lasted well into the twentieth century, up through the 1960s when dramatic changes took place.

### *Secular,*

The emergence of the Renaissance in southern Europe in the fifteenth century contributed to a deeper appreciation for and study of the natural world. In turn, the Protestant Reformation in northern Europe in the sixteenth century also led to significant changes. One major shift reshaped how people regarded the authority of the church. A vernacular Bible became available to all persons and with it came a focus on taking personal responsibility for one’s life. While formation of Protestant state churches was underway in that period — Lutheran, Reformed, and Anglican — a variety of sectarian movements broke away from them. It was in this changing context that a revised, secular social imaginary took shape. Natural life came to be viewed increasingly as being *areligious* — neutral and unbiased, based on using reason and personal experience to take an objective view of life.<sup>9</sup> This changed understanding became known as the Enlightenment and led to the pursuit of what became known as the Modern Project. This project involved humans employing their reason and experience to understand and master the physical world. This shift pushed the God-hypothesis further and further to the margins as it lost its value for explaining what had not yet been discovered through reason and science.

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8 Taylor, *A Secular Age*, pp. 96-125.

9 James K. Smith, *How (Not) To Be Secular: Reading Charles Taylor* (2014), p. 142.

As the shift increased over the next several centuries, this secular understanding of life was conceived as what we might call a type of “subtraction theory of religion.” It was believed that religion would continue to diminish in importance as reason and science came to explain more and more of life. This view was especially enhanced when Charles Darwin expanded on his observations about evolution in the natural world, creating his theory that evolution is a preferred understanding for explaining the development of human life. Peter Berger, as one of the most prominent of these theorists, coined the term “sacred canopy” in 1967 to describe this shift. His idea of a sacred canopy is that it represents the worldview of a group of people, a nation, or a culture that is shaped by a certain set of common assumptions which give order and meaning to life.<sup>10</sup>

Berger argued at the time that these common assumptions would increasingly move away from religious views — thus, the “subtraction theory” of the secular. Interestingly, in the further shift since he introduced the idea in the 1960s, Berger has come to reject his earlier theorizing and has replaced it with an acceptance of diverse religious views existing within multiple modernities. This understanding constitutes what he now calls our “pluralistic age.”<sup>11</sup> Acceptance of this view of the secular co-existing with the religious has spread around the world in the last half century. It is now the norm for countries that identify culturally with a particular traditional religion — for example, Turkey in relation to Islam, India in relation to Hinduism, and Israel in relation to Judaism — to have secular governments.

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10 Peter L. Berger, *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion* (1969).

11 Peter L. Berger, *The Many Altars of Modernity: Toward a Paradigm for Religion in a Pluralistic Age* (2015).

### Secular<sub>3</sub>

A secular<sub>3</sub> perspective is similar to the one just described, but with what Taylor calls new “conditions of belief.” In Taylor’s view, the “naïve acknowledgement of the transcendent” has come to an end.<sup>12</sup> Belief in God is now regarded as just another option — and one that has become increasingly more difficult to embrace. Taylor poses this key question: “How is it that 500 years ago, to deny the existence of God or the transcendent would have been unthinkable; whereas today, belief in God is simply one option among an explosion of others?”<sup>13</sup> Many of these options now incorporate a view of personal spirituality woven into a scientific view of life. But the primary change is that each individual is left to construct his or her own understanding without the help of any outside authority.

Taylor refers to this as the “Age of Authenticity” as well as “expressive individualism.”<sup>14</sup> People are expected to find their own way to make sense of life, to discover their own fulfillment — in the American slang of the 1960s, to “do their own thing.”<sup>15</sup> The development of this shift in understanding was particularly prevalent in social movements of that decade, especially in the consumer and sexual revolutions. Among today’s emerging generations there continues to be a focus on forming one’s own identity, including sexual identity, political identity, gender identity, and religious identity. Gone or rapidly eroding are the moral constraints of the church and those embedded within social institutions and external authorities. In Taylor’s words, this has resulted in “a spiritual super nova, a kind of galloping pluralism afoot within society.”<sup>16</sup> It represents the emergence of the “moralistic, therapeutic deism” Smith and Denton wrote about, as well as what Taylor calls “exclusive humanism” and “expressive individualism.” The challenge for the church today is twofold: to communicate the gospel to persons who are shaped by

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12 Taylor, *A Secular Age*, pp. 20-21.

13 *Ibid.*, p. 3.

14 *Ibid.*, pp. 473, 485.

15 *Ibid.*, p. 299.

16 *Ibid.*



this understanding, while also trying as a Christian community to make sense of how to live out the gospel in daily life.

### *How the Church Came to Live Within a Secular<sub>3</sub> Culture*

As noted earlier, the church took on the responsibility in the U.S. from its inception to develop a churched culture, due largely to the legacy of European State Churches with their acceptance of a Constantinian Christendom in relation to the church. This was especially prominent among Protestant churches in the nineteenth century, but had to give way to a Judeo-Christian-shaped culture by the beginning of the twentieth century due to the large influx at that time of Roman Catholic and Jewish immigrants from southern and eastern Europe. This shift toward a more pluralistic approach emerged as Protestants, Catholics, and Jews shared the responsibility for being the chaplains for society. This pluralization of religious views was extended further in the early 1900s as churches and synagogues increasingly separated into two distinct streams. One stream ("fundamentalists") incorporated the strategies of retrenchment and separation in trying to preserve their heritage, while the other stream ("modernists") pursued strategies to be relevant and accommodating to the modern world. These diverse strategies were employed, in particular, in light of further scientific discoveries and the utilization of reason in critical interpretation of the Bible.

A secular understanding of life became increasingly apparent as this pluralism emerged. Following World War II, a revolution of increasing expectations developed. This took place around the world as colonial political and economic systems unraveled and scores of independent nations were formed. It also took place within the U.S. as the civil rights movement deeply challenged the existing social order and the countercultural youth movement deeply challenged the established institutions of the day and the mantra of that baby boomer generation became "never trust anyone over 30."

In this context, the optimistic view that the Modern Project could

be achieved began to erode. It was displaced by what came to be labeled, as noted above, as the “emerging postmodern condition.” This point of view was that many of the assumptions embedded within the Enlightenment should be challenged and deconstructed. All these developments stand behind the emergence of the individual self as the primary arbiter of moral choices and personal identity. Religious values and a pursuit of spirituality continued to operate, but they now represented just one of the many choices that individuals had before them for making sense of life. The influence of external authorities, social institutions, and belief in a transcendent God continued to erode, giving rise to exclusive humanism that Taylor describes within the meaning of secular.<sup>3</sup>

Churches today face two fundamental challenges. First, they are struggling to “pass on the faith” to the next generation, as was discussed above in relation to the “dones” and “nones.” Second, it is becoming more difficult to communicate the faith to those outside the church who are now increasingly being shaped by a culture of expressive individualism. We will now look at each of those challenges in detail.

## COMMUNICATING THE GOSPEL IN A SECULAR<sub>3</sub> WORLD

The church can no longer assume that people understand the value of Christian faith and the gospel of Jesus Christ for living their everyday lives and dealing with everyday challenges. This is one of the most significant results of the shift towards a secular<sub>3</sub> reality. The church is challenged to show people why the Christian story is the most compelling narrative for understanding life's purpose and meaning. This is not just about engaging in apologetics — that is, presenting arguments for the validity of the faith. It is also about embodying this truth in the way that the community lives its life, to demonstrate the value of Christian faith for dealing with the everyday challenges people face in the West. Many people who might venture into a church in the twenty-first century want to experience

the difference this congregation is making in their local community as well as in the lives of those who are participating. It is no longer enough for a congregation to provide particular religious goods and services (such as worship, education, children's programming). It also must demonstrate the good it is accomplishing in "the world."

These challenges are leading to an identity crisis in the church. In a secular<sub>3</sub> reality, the church is not sure who it is. This is driven in part by the fact that there is no longer a broad assumption that "god" exists.<sup>17</sup> Therefore, church is no longer a central influence in shaping the lives of most people. The church must now articulate its identity in ways that it did not have to in the past. The younger generations, in particular, are pursuing other ways to find meaning and purpose in their lives. Congregations now have to show why the story they believe in and the way they live their lives are compelling amidst the plurality of options that are available.

Many congregations default to describing their identity in terms of their denominational affiliation and theological tradition. They are accustomed to articulating how their tradition is different from others who are "doing church." Protestants can name how they differ from Catholics, and vice versa. Mainline Christians differentiate from Evangelicals. Evangelicals differentiate from Pentecostals, and so on. This approach continues to be deeply shaped by the assumptions that the church will be central to people's lives and that the challenge is to compete with other denominations or congregations for potential new members. Churches located near one another often see neighboring congregations as their competition rather than being united by faith in Jesus, which results in a lack of partnership or engagement among Christians within a neighborhood. This competitive approach completely misses the reality of a secular<sub>3</sub> age. The primary challenge today is not about competing with other congregations. It is rather about how to form genuine Christian faith in the midst of a culture that assumes we don't need God.

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17 Taylor, *A Secular Age*, p. 25.

### *Experiencing Church*

Think about a regular experience of “church” that someone might have in the area where you live. Imagine that a person who has no Christian faith background visits a worship service at a local congregation in their neighborhood. They don’t really know the difference between Baptist, Presbyterian, Episcopalian, Methodist, and Catholic. So they just go to the church down the road from their house because they are dealing with some hard stuff in their life right now. They are trying to make sense of life in their search for meaning. Walking into a worship service, they are greeted by a friendly looking person who hands them a piece of paper with an outline of the worship service. They glance at the paper and follow the people in front of them who are taking seats in a large room filled with pews. Over the next hour, they hear people singing songs they don’t know, read from texts they are not familiar with, listen to a speech about the Bible and what it means for us today, hear people confessing their “sins,” and participate in a ritual called “communion” that has something to do with Jesus. They leave having felt welcomed into the space, but mostly confused about what was happening and why. They know they are invited back but aren’t sure this “church” thing is actually going to help them address the issues that are keeping them up at night.

As you read this, you might be thinking that your church does a much better job of being “seeker sensitive” and welcoming people who have no church background. That’s to be celebrated. The reality, however, is that even those churches that are focused on creating spaces that are more accessible to the “nones” and the “dones” rarely address the core questions those folks are asking. “Is there a god or universal spirit out there? If so, does that god care about the things I’m facing in my life? Does belief or trust in god somehow help me make sense of what I’m experiencing now? Would participating in this church community help me make spiritual sense out of my life?” Instead, churches often focus on telling visitors what the congregation believes, and how they can get more involved in

the life of the congregation. These are often not the primary questions those outside the congregation are asking.

Congregations sometimes create specialized ministries to engage big questions about life's meaning — programs like Alpha or something similar.<sup>18</sup> But rarely do congregations see that sort of engagement as the primary work they need to be doing with everyone in the congregation. Many people who are already part of a congregation cannot articulate the difference Jesus makes in their daily life. Nor can they name where they see God's presence and activity in their everyday experience. This isn't because they don't believe, but rather because congregations have not designed their shared practices to help form people to answer these kinds of questions. This makes it very unlikely that they will be able to help even the next generation within the church answer those questions, let alone reach out to their neighbors or co-workers.

Passing on Christian faith in a secular<sub>3</sub> world requires that people be spiritually formed to be aware of God's presence in their everyday life and to be able to talk about it. Questions need to be a regular practice in congregational lives, questions like "Where have you experienced God this past week?" and "What do you think God might be up to right now with the people and in the places where you spend your time?" Our way of "doing church" must make answering such questions essential to our practices. Helping people to feel comfortable talking about where they experience God on a regular basis is critical in a secular<sub>3</sub> world that assumes that God doesn't exist and isn't present. Sharing stories of people's experiences with God is a key antidote to living within the influence of a secular<sub>3</sub> culture.

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18 More information available at <https://alphausa.org>

## Telling Stories

Communicating Christian faith in today's cultures cannot take place just on Sunday mornings. Effective communication must be personal, theological, and contextual. In the twenty-first century, story is a key medium; people share stories by the millions every single day across multiple virtual platforms. So, stories must be an integral part of the life of a congregation that wants to help form faith in the people both in and outside their community. Stories can help convey authenticity and transparency, two important values in today's cultures. Persons sharing about how Jesus has made a difference in their lives carries a much different weight in the secular<sub>3</sub> age than a doctrinal claim made by a trained theologian. This is not to take away from the importance of doctrine or trained theologians, but the currency of this age is authenticity.<sup>19</sup> Stories from "regular people" often carry more weight than those shared by paid church staff.

These stories must be overtly theological in order to help form Christian faith. People need to talk explicitly about where they actually experience God in their lives. They need to draw direct connections between their life experiences and what they hear from God through the Scriptures. In an age in which the assumption is that God is not needed, overt statements about God's reality are critical for effective communication. Within a particular social context, stories need to be told by people who understand the language, culture, and values of that context. The stories need to be grounded in the lived experience of people in a particular cultural milieu. Imagine a group of people in a congregation being empowered to tell stories about a recent time when they experienced God in their lives. Imagine a person sharing with their neighbor about how they made a key decision in their life based in part on how they sensed God was leading them. These are the kinds of contextual stories that can help communicate the Christian faith in a secular<sub>3</sub> world.

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<sup>19</sup> Andrew Root, *Faith Formation in a Secular Age: Responding to the Church's Obsession with Youthfulness* 2017, p. 12.

## STRATEGIES FOR MULTIPLICATION OF CHURCHES IN A SECULAR<sub>3</sub> WORLD

From around 1800 (when denominations began to be formed) through the late 1960s in the West, and especially in the United States, traditional church planting by denominations successfully utilized various strategies, morphing to new ones as their contexts shifted. The final strategy employed was to start neighborhood-based suburban congregations. Denominations bought land, built a first facility, and served a geographic neighborhood of new persons moving in who transferred their memberships to the new congregation. But this came to a screeching halt by the early 1970s with the emergence and increasing influence of secular<sub>3</sub> culture. New imagination and creativity were required to re-engage in church planting. A number of diverse strategies were employed, such as house churches, racial reconciliation churches, and regional ministry centers.

### *The Megachurch Movement*

One of the most significant developments in church life in the U.S. in the 1970s was the emergence of the megachurch movement.<sup>20</sup> This was then exported to many places around the world. A mega-church is defined as a congregation that has over 2,000 persons in attendance across all of its weekly services. These congregations usually emphasized being “seeker sensitive” or “seeker driven” in an effort to reach persons who were outside of the church. In 1970, there were less than 50 such congregations, and by 1980, about 150. But by 2015 the U.S. had more than 1,600, and most leaned evangelical in their beliefs. This phenomenal growth took place at the same time that mainline denominations continued their significant decline in membership, which had begun in the mid-1960s.

This growth of mega-churches occurred in two phases.

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<sup>20</sup> Information used in this section came from The Hartford Institute for Religious Research “2015 Megachurch Report” at <http://hirr.hartsem.edu/megachurch/mega-church-2015-summary-report.html>.

The first was from the 1980s to the early 2000s and took place primarily among the late baby boomers and Generation X. Many of these mega-churches began experiencing difficulty in going through leadership transition to replace their long-term pastor/leader, who frequently had been a founder.

The second phase has been occurring since the early 2000s with younger pastor/leaders who have focused more on reaching the Gen X population and Millennials (born in 1981 to 1996). These newer mega-churches have shifted some of their strategies. They are now building smaller facilities on their main campuses, auditoriums with seating for 1200 — compare that to the more than 1600 seats typical of by the earlier mega-churches. This works largely because over 65% are also employing a multi-site approach utilizing video technology.

Scholars forecast that mega-churches will continue to grow significantly during this third decade of the twenty-first century and beyond, although their ministry strategies are likely to continue to morph. It is evident that these congregations have been at least somewhat successful in reaching persons who are living their lives in a secular<sub>3</sub> world outside of the church. But it also is evident that this type of congregation typically requires a fairly gifted, strong pastor/leader, and extensive resources to build and sustain staff and facilities. There are many persons now outside the church, especially many of the “nones” and “dones,” who will not be reached by more megachurches being started.

### *Church Planting by Groups Going Local*

Over the past several decades, another church-planting movement has begun to take root in the West, particularly in the North American secular<sub>3</sub> context. The strategy is to “go local.” Congregations are being started by small groups of mission-minded persons sharing leadership while being led by a church-planting pastor. These groups seek to build relationships with their neighbors as



they engage in discerning how to participate more fully in what God might be up to in their neighborhood. The gathered community they create engages in worship, teaching, and mutual care, but its energy is focused just as much on (and in) the larger community as it is on the congregation's inner life. The key to the vibrancy of these newly planted neighborhood churches is the shared understanding that the Spirit of God is active in their midst and is leading them into embodying their faith in their context, among their neighbors. This requires their commitment to cultivating shared practices (which we'll return to in the next section of this chapter).

A variation on this approach is emerging. At the time we are writing this chapter, the church is living through the crisis caused by a global pandemic. This COVID-19 pandemic has created a challenge that also presents an opportunity. The multiplicative potential of people gathering online for worship, making relational connections, and engaging in cooperative service to others is astronomical. Instead of only thinking about how we can *add* people to a physical location, we are now being invited to consider how God might be moving us to *multiply* our efforts through networking with hundreds and thousands of people who are searching online for some kind of peace and community. What does this kind of multiplication look like?

Many congregations are currently working very hard to move their worship service and other programs online in response to the current pandemic. But an online worship format doesn't necessarily mean we will multiply our efforts. We have an opportunity to think in terms of multiplication—empowering lay people to gather in small groups in their homes or online for worship and relationship building.

This is a good strategy for small and medium sized churches. Instead of building large sites for worship and programming like larger churches are currently doing, imagine many "micro-sites" led by people in congregations who have been equipped to lead

groups of 8 to 12 persons who gather online or in person. These groups can engage in worship and discussion via worship services being offered online. They can also mobilize to engage with neighbors (online or in-person neighbors) in ways that it might take a whole congregation a long time to decide to do. This decentralized approach to multiplication puts authority in the hands of the leaders and participants in these “micro-sites.” It doesn’t require a large budget, but it does necessitate finding and equipping leaders who are willing to gather and direct others.

### ENGAGING IN BIBLICAL PRACTICES: A KEY APPROACH TO CHURCH PLANTING IN A SECULAR<sub>3</sub> WORLD

Some core biblical practices can help new congregations engage effectively with people who are deeply shaped by the cultural influences of a secular<sub>3</sub> world. A variety of approaches are available to a person or a group of individuals who are seeking to plant a new congregation. The approaches are flexible; they can be scaled up for engagement as a congregation begins to grow, and scaled up or down by existing congregations of various sizes.

#### *Communal Discernment*

We need to be able to name together what God is inviting us into. How might the Spirit be moving in the midst of changing circumstances? According to Ruth Haley Barton, “Discernment is much more than mere decision making; it is, first of all, a habit, a way of seeing that can permeate our whole life.”<sup>21</sup> Congregations need to engage in practices that help them join in God’s mission in their neighborhoods. The theological assumption here is simple. God, through the power of Jesus Christ and the leading of God’s Spirit, is present in our everyday lives and is ahead of us in mission in the

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21 Ruth Haley Barton, *Pursuing God’s Will Together: A Discernment Practice for Leadership Groups* (2012), p. 56.

world. God continuously invites all into this work. These invitations are easily missed if we are not collectively paying attention to the ways God is speaking to us—through our experiences, through Scripture, through prayer, and in many other ways.

This practice of *communal discernment* needs a structural home among persons engaged in church planting. At Mill City Church in Minneapolis (where one of us serves on the pastoral staff),<sup>22</sup> communal discernment is utilized by small groups of “missional communities” to determine what aspect of God’s mission they might be called to join in. This takes a number of forms, including prayer times together, prayerful walks around the neighborhood, dwelling in Scripture together, and processing life experiences that seem to be full of God’s presence. The purpose of this ongoing practice of communal discernment is to help the group know how God’s Spirit may be leading them to join the work that God is already doing around them.

One such group within Mill City Church began its communal discernment by walking and praying in a neighborhood close to where the church worships. This prayer walk led them to research the validity of a local body work (massage) business. Their research helped them discover that there was illegal activity happening through this business that exploited women through sex work. The group felt led by God to make the police and local city council aware of this. The city council soon passed an ordinance requiring such businesses to get a license to legitimize their work, and as a result, this business was forced to close. It seemed like a victory for this missional community that was trying to follow God’s Spirit. But they soon discovered how the now out-of-work women from this business were negatively affected by their efforts.

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22 Mill City Church is a congregation that was started in a neighborhood of north Minneapolis by Pastor Michael Binder in the mid-2000s. He continues to preach and teach from time to time but active day-to-day leadership has been taken over by others.

This reality led the group to begin to learn how to build relationships with women across the city who were involved in different types of sex work. They sought training from other Christians who knew how to build relationships with strip club owners and how to get permission to support the women who were working there. The women of the group began to visit strip clubs once a month to spend time with the women when they weren't working, get to know their stories, and pray for them when appropriate. For multiple years, this group has continued to follow the leading of God's Spirit, building relationships with these women and showing them the love of Jesus. Their work has had a tremendous impact on the lives of many of them.

Churches being planted need to organize their group life and regular activities based on practices of communal discernment that help them notice where God may be inviting them to join God's work in the world. This helps prevent an emerging congregation from spending the majority of their time and energy on their own enrichment and education and, instead, turns their attention to the everyday ways God is working in the contexts where they spend their time. It helps build their confidence in naming God's presence and responding to God's invitations in their regular lives, even when it is not a programmed activity of the church. This leads to people in congregations noticing where God is already at work in the lives of the neighbors, co-workers, friends, and family members who may not be connected to any congregation. They begin to see how they can play a role in the lives of these folks even if they haven't yet set foot in any church building. This is how the church being planted can be mobilized to join God's mission together in everyday life.

### *Spiritual Storytelling*

Another core practice for churches being planted in the midst of a secular<sub>3</sub> world is *spiritual storytelling*. Telling spiritual stories creates space for people to talk in an authentic way about their experience

of God in their lives. New congregations need to build storytelling into the regular rhythm of their life together in spaces like Sunday worship, midweek gatherings, and on retreats. One new church in Virginia incorporated spiritual storytelling weekly into their worship. People in the congregation were invited to share ways that God impacted their lives during the previous week. Typically, some share stories about a struggle they are facing and where they sense God to be in the midst of that. Others share stories about a risk they felt God was inviting them to take. This community gathers for worship ready to hear each other's stories of real experiences of God in their lives. The stories have become a measurement of the well-being of the congregation, a metric as important as giving or attendance.

Recently I (Michael) conducted an experiment in a local pub in the neighborhood where I live and where our congregation worships. We were inspired by the work of the Hearth Community in Oregon, which gathers people monthly to listen to stories on different themes.<sup>23</sup> They build relationships and support local causes in concert with appreciating the stories of their neighbors. The experiment was focused on trying to create an opportunity in a public space for people to share stories about their lives. This kind of opportunity could provide a window into how neighbors who are not connected to congregations find meaning in their lives. It also was an opportunity for people of Christian faith to share their own stories in an environment not controlled by Christians. I shared the idea with the owner of the local pub, and he thought it was a very interesting experiment. He agreed to host an open mic storytelling night in the pub with the theme of "Stories of Home."

People were invited via social media and pretty soon the room was full of 40 to 50 people who wanted to participate. People were invited to share a story that was five minutes or shorter on the theme "Home." Those who didn't feel comfortable standing up

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23 More information on the Hearth Community is available at <https://thehearthcommunity.com>

in front of others were invited to make use of the “introvert special” — an option to write out their story on a sheet of paper and have someone else read it aloud. The evening was filled with stories from the crowd. Some were sad, some were funny, some were heart-warming, some were dull. But in a short period of time, the group of people was talking about things that really mattered in their lives, Christians and non-Christians alike. This kind of public spiritual storytelling could be a great environment for new congregations wishing to engage those who may not feel comfortable stepping into a worship service.

Mill City Church centers their annual winter retreat around storytelling by the people who choose to attend the retreat. The prompt questions are the same every year: What have you seen God doing in your life? How has God been inviting you to participate in what God is doing? Many persons from the congregation have shared stories about how God has been present in their suffering through significant health challenges, relationship challenges, and financial challenges. Some have shared about the doubts they struggle with and how God is inviting them to trust in a fresh way. Others have shared about God’s healing in their life. Still others have shared about how God has invited them and others to engage in fighting for justice and sharing their faith with others. These stories have become a staple in the life of this congregation. They are stories told by “regular people” to “regular people” that shape the faith of those telling the stories and the faith of those who hear them. Storytelling is an essential practice for new congregations interested in forming faith in people both inside and outside the church.

### *Receiving Hospitality*

In Luke 10, Jesus sends his disciples to towns and places that he intends to go. He gives them specific instructions to look for peace in these towns and accept the hospitality of whoever welcomes them. This approach places the disciples in a vulnerable position — they are dependent upon the hospitality of people they have

just met. Jesus refers to that vulnerability as like being “sheep in the midst of wolves.” Yet, this dependency unlocks something in the conversations that happen around tables in the homes of those who offer hospitality to the disciples. Instead of the people in those towns having to travel to spaces that are foreign to them in order to engage with the disciples, the disciples meet them where they live. *Receiving hospitality* is a key practice the church must embrace if it wants to engage a secular<sub>3</sub> culture and form and communicate faith.

One way an emerging or existing congregation can practice this is by shifting the location of their regular meetings to a public place. A few people from a congregation in Cincinnati decided to go to a local (affordable) restaurant and have a conversation about the Bible. This was a baby step towards learning to talk about God in spaces they didn’t control. Some people in the restaurant were curious about what they were discussing and asked if they could join the conversation. These people never would have attended the Bible study if it had been held in the church building. But they engaged in the conversation that day and asked if the group would be meeting there in the future.

This same group from the Cincinnati congregation decided to take their experiment to another level. They decided to go to a local pub and invite people there to share their spiritual stories with them. They got permission from the owner of the local pub by sharing openly about who they were and what they wanted to do. Their goal was to create a relational space for people to share what their own spiritual journey had been like in their lives. Nothing more. They went to the pub on a weeknight, gathered around a table, looked at each other, and decided they were too nervous to try to strike up a conversation with anyone. A person who had been serving as their coach in this work volunteered to go first and strike up a conversation. He transparently introduced himself to a woman in the pub as a member of a local congregation that was interested in hearing people’s spiritual stories. She gladly shared her experience with him. This broke the ice for the group. They ended up engaging

with almost everyone in the pub that evening by serving as listeners. They heard stories from people who were never going to show up to their Sunday worship service, and made important relational connections in the process. Furthermore, they learned how to live out their faith while receiving hospitality from this local establishment.

Learning to receive hospitality unlocks new ways for congregations to engage with the people in their context. Rather than waiting for people to enter into spaces that a congregation has organized and controls, congregations need to learn to follow the leading of God's Spirit into spaces they don't control. It is easy to change the location of meetings the church is already planning so they are held in public spaces.

However, many churches find this idea very strange. They ask, "Why would we meet somewhere else, especially if it is going to cost us money, when we can just meet at our church building for free?" One answer is that the congregation will make far more connections with people outside their church simply by meeting in these places. Another response is that the conversation that takes place is altered by the location of the meeting in ways that help the congregation be much more aware of their local context. A third response is that this is a practice that Jesus taught his disciples and therefore is worth trying in our time and place as well.

Many congregations discover that there are numerous locations near their church building that have free or very affordable meeting spaces — perhaps at the local library, in a room above a restaurant, or in a space owned by a local business. The practice of receiving hospitality makes it essential for the congregation to engage with people outside the walls of its building.



## CONCLUSION

The church of Jesus Christ under the leadership of the Spirit is being invited by God to engage in taking a new journey within the secular<sub>3</sub> world we are living in today. This invitation comes with a challenge: we have to change some of what we have learned under the influence of a church culture shaped by the legacy of Christendom. But in many ways, aspects of this journey are not new. Many aspects of the challenge before us harken back to a first century world in which the emerging Christian movement set about planting new congregations in a pluralistic context. In that context, they had to embody the truthfulness of their beliefs within their shared practices that they worked to demonstrate daily before their watching neighbors.

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. This chapter discusses the emerging group known as the “do-nes,” persons whose spirituality has been described as consisting of being a “moralistic therapeutic deism.” Who are these persons and what implications does their worldview (social imaginary) have for presenting the gospel today?
2. In the 1950s in the West, it was virtually impossible not to believe in the God of the Bible, whereas today an increasing number of people find it easier, even inescapable, not to hold such a view. Think about who you know for which this is currently the case. How would you go about approaching them in a conversation about God?
3. Sociologists once theorized that a secular world would gradually diminish notions of God (the subtraction theory), but today, in fact, we find there is an acceptance of diverse religious views within multiple worldviews. Charles Taylor describes this as representing “secular<sub>3</sub>.” To what extent is this type of secularism present in your context?

4. Churches have developed different strategies to address our changed context. One is to retrench and separate from the world in order to preserve their heritage, while another is to seek to be relevant by accommodating various practices and styles from the world. What approach has your church taken? What are the limitations or pitfalls of each of these strategies?
  
5. This chapter stressed the importance of “embodying the faith/truth” as a way to best communicate the gospel within today’s secular<sub>3</sub> world. What does this entail for a church seeking to share the gospel as good news with its neighbors?

### PERSONAL NOTES

*Please use this space for writing your own reflection or a prayer regarding the content of this chapter.*

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# Church Planting in the Context of Islam

*Gary Teja*

## A PRIMER ON ISLAM

Historically, Islam has its origin in what is today Saudi Arabia. It was founded by Muhammad in A.D. 622 after several purported visits by the angel Jibreel (Gabriel). Muhammad had a series of visions, out of which came the *Quran* (also spelled Koran or Qur'an), Islam's primary Scriptures. *Islam* means "submission to the will of God." The word *Quran* means "the recitation." (Muhammad, an illiterate merchant, recited the Quran as it was given to him by the angel Gabriel.) Those who practice this one-time "desert religion" call themselves *Muslims*.

Muhammad eventually made Mecca the holiest of Islam's religious sites. Medina was another very important city in the struggle of Muslims to become a major monotheistic religion in an area that at that time was dominated by polytheists and Jews. Muhammad lived for only ten more years but left behind a religion that had expanded — primarily through military conquest — from a small area in the desert to a large portion of the then-known world. Many areas previously dominated by Christians succumbed to the expansionist

nature of Islam, resulting in an ongoing struggle between these two religions (with Jewish people at times falling victim to both).

After the Prophet Muhammad died in 632 without naming a successor, an internal struggle ensued among his followers. They could not agree on whether to choose bloodline successors or select leaders most likely to follow the tenets of the faith. The group now known as Sunnis opted for the latter; they chose Abu Bakr, the prophet's adviser, to become the first successor, or *caliph*, to lead the Islamic state. Shias, on the other hand, favored Ali, who was both Muhammad's cousin and his son-in-law. Ali and his successors, who are called *imams*, continue to lead the Shias and are considered to be descendants of Muhammad.

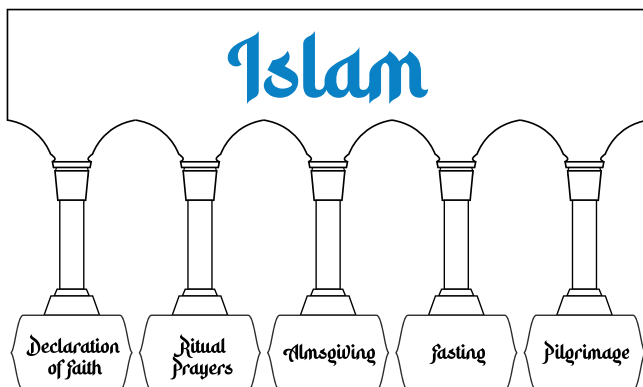
The two most prominent sects are Sunnis, who make up 85% of Muslims worldwide, and Shias, who make up 15%. Some of the present-day struggles between nations — Iraq and Iran, for example — are the result of the ongoing conflict between these two major Muslim groups. Some other, smaller sects are derivations of them.

Today there are 1.7 billion followers of Islam in the world<sup>1</sup> — 24.5% of the world's population. Their religious practices center on what have come to be called the Five Pillars of Faith. They are: 1) Declaration of Faith (*Shahadah*), 2) Ritual prayers (*Salat*), 3) Almsgiving (*Zakat*), 4) Fasting (*Sawm*), and 5) Pilgrimage (*Hajj*). Let's take a closer look at these pillars briefly.

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1 <https://onepathnetwork.com/how-many-muslims-in-the-world>, retrieved July 8, 2021.

## THE FIVE PILLARS OF FAITH



### THE FIRST PILLAR: DECLARATION OF FAITH

The *Shahadah* is recited into the ear of a newborn and also into the ear of a person who has died as he is being buried. This is, indeed, the declaration of faith for Muslims from the time of their birth to the time of their death. In common practice, by reciting the *Shahadah* before three witnesses, a non-Muslim can become a Muslim. From that point on, if that person were to deny Islam, he would be considered an apostate, lower than an infidel.

This is the fate of *believers of Muslim background* (BMBs) who have come to faith in Jesus, leaving behind their old ways and beliefs. One of my dear friends can visit his family only under the cover of darkness, because he would be dealt with harshly by those who knew him once as a Muslim. In many countries, former Muslims are stigmatized — forced to continue carrying identity cards that mark them as Muslim. To change the card to read “formerly a Muslim” makes them an apostate and could lead to their death. Jonathan Andrews deals extensively with this topic in his book *Identity Crisis*.<sup>2</sup> He points out the problems listed above but also additional problems with registration cards. For example, it is nearly impossible to get a change of religion on one’s identity card, so if a person has

2 Jonathan Andrews, *Identity Crisis: Religious Registration in the Middle East* (2016).

converted and left Islam, when it comes time for the convert's children to be schooled the parent's former status as a Muslim means his children must be indoctrinated in the Islamic faith. Andrews shares many stories of those who have converted and the problems their identity cards have raised for them.

Wives of Muslim men who convert to another religion often leave their husbands, taking the children with them. Husbands whose wives leave Islam often throw them out into the street or kill them. Under the laws of many Muslim countries, former Muslims have no rights. They lose their jobs, their families, and their social networks. If allowed to live and not forced to flee, at the very least they are considered pariahs like the lepers of the Old Testament. To take a stand for Christ in such countries comes at great cost. To borrow a phrase from Dietrich Bonhoeffer, "the cost of discipleship" is very high. This is true for many people around the world, not only for those in Muslim majority countries.

## THE SECOND PILLAR: RITUAL PRAYERS

Five obligatory times of prayer occur every day. As each of those times approaches, there is a "call to prayer," which reminds Muslims to take time out to fulfill this obligation. Not all Muslims complete all five, for various reasons. However, the influence of Muslim prayer can be seen as prayer rooms began to be constructed in airports and shopping centers in both Muslim-dominated and non-Muslim countries. For example, London Heathrow has prayer rooms used mainly by Muslims, although they are called Multi Faith Prayer Rooms. Shopping malls in modern Dubai have a prayer room, and signs light up to tell Muslims when it is time for one of the obligatory prayers.

Prior to prayers, Muslims go through ritual washings. This is called *wudu*. These ablutions are very important — without them, one's prayers are of no effect. The ablutions are a form of ritual pu-

rification Muhammad taught to his followers. *Wudu* involves washing the hands, mouth, nostrils, arms, head, and feet with water in a particular order as prescribed in the Quran (Quran 5:6).

- The prayers themselves require certain actions and postures.
- First, the practitioner, after having gone through the required ablutions, rolls out his prayer rug and stands on it, facing from wherever he may be in the world in the direction of Mecca. (Originally it was in the direction of Jerusalem.)
- Second, still standing, he raises his hands by his ears and recites the phrase “*Allahu akbar*,” which means “God is great(er).”
- During the prayer, a Sunni Muslim will also prostrate himself with his head touching the floor. This is probably the posture most non-Muslims are familiar with when they think of Muslims at prayer. Shias place their hands and arms differently in prayer and do not touch the ground directly when prostrate, but place the forehead on a rock.
- Other actions are also a part of the prayer, which ends with turning to those at either side with words of blessing.

Women, whether Sunnis or Shia, say their prayers separate from the men. Some mosques have separate rooms or other areas reserved for women. Oftentimes while the men go to mosque to pray, women remain at home and pray there.

### THE THIRD PILLAR: ALMSGIVING

Almsgiving has been stereotyped in movies by beggars who plead “alms for the poor, alms for the poor.” A Muslim is obligated to remember those less fortunate and by practice are expected to give 2.5% of their financial assets as a minimum tithe. Regarding



other goods — cattle and so forth — one may be obligated to also pay *Zakat* (alms) at a rate anywhere from 2.5% to 20%. Many Muslims give their alms willingly. Some others do it to gain points to place on the scale that will determine their final destination.

The Bible talks about those who give their tithes and offerings voluntarily and cheerfully and those who give grudgingly (2 Corinthians 9:7). Remember the case of Ananias and Sapphira, who lied about how much they gave, and the punishment they received? (Acts 5:11). We're even told that those who withhold their tithes and offerings are stealing from God (Malachi 3:8-9).

## THE FOURTH PILLAR: FASTING

Fasting is also a practice that Muslims have in common with Christians. For Muslims it is obligatory; for Christians it is voluntary. During the month of *Ramadan* (the ninth month in the Islamic calendar), Muslims fast from dawn to dusk as a time for spiritual reflection, heightened devotion, and worship. In many countries *Iftar*, the evening meal, is an important communal event as are other meals that can be communal. During Ramadan, though, a faithful observer will abstain from eating food, drinking liquids, smoking, or engaging in sexual activities. Each night after sunset, some food may be eaten and liquids drunk, but they are to be kept to a minimum until the end of Ramadan, when a feast is celebrated (*Eid-al-Fitr*).

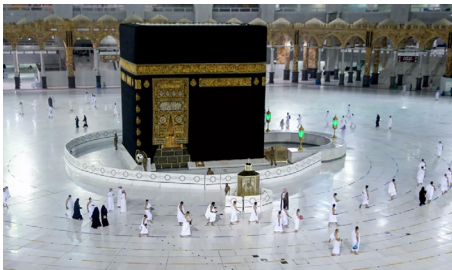
Jesus spoke about fasting, but in terms of not letting others know you are fasting (Matthew 6:16-18). Fasting is presented as a private matter between you and God. For Muslims, on the other hand, fasting during Ramadan becomes a communal event. Even the food shared at night or at the end of Ramadan is communal. Because Christians' fasting does not have a communal dimension, Muslims often do not believe that Christians fast.

I remember a Muslim student of mine in Costa Rica who refrained from food and did not participate in certain school activities that took place during Ramadan. She was among the few Muslims in that Catholic country at the time.

## THE FIFTH PILLAR: PILGRIMAGE

The pilgrimage to Mecca is the last of the official five pillars of faith for Muslims. Each Muslim is required to make the pilgrimage to Mecca at least once. If someone is infirm, he can pay someone else to go in his place. If he is poor, he can be exempt from making the pilgrimage. Since Mecca is in Saudi Arabia, the Saudis see themselves as the guardians of the faith. No non-Muslim is permitted to enter Mecca.

Pilgrims go to Mecca, the holiest city of Islam, because it was the birthplace of Muhammad. Millions arrive annually, donning white clothing so there will be no distinction between rich or poor. One of the events celebrated in Mecca during the pilgrimage is to walk around the *Kaaba*, a building in the shape of a giant cube. Within it is a black stone — a meteorite that Muslims believe Abraham and Ishmael placed inside. The Kaaba is said to have existed there before the birth of Islam. Muhammad is said to have ridded it of idols that polytheists had placed inside and were worshipping, and turned it



into a place of worship of Allah, who is one. Other events during the Meccan pilgrimage include walking or running between two hills, a ritual stoning of pillars representing Satan, and various prayers.

A follower of Islam who has completed *haji* (pilgrimage) is entitled to use the title *hajji*, or “one who has done *haji*.”

We have described briefly each of the five pillars of Islam. Some of them are probably practices that Muhammad learned from Jewish or Christian merchants who passed by Medina and Mecca, which were on major trade routes. You will notice similarities to disciplines practiced by Christians, which indeed point to a “borrowing” from the two Abrahamic religions, Judaism and Christianity. Even the practice of ablutions predates Islam. (See Exodus 30:17-21.) Islamic mysticism known as *sufism* probably came from the Christian mystics.

Philip Jenkins compares many Islamic practices with the early practices of Eastern Christianity. He states, “Eastern Christians were a well-known presence in the Arabian world, and influenced the early development of Islam.”<sup>3</sup>

Now we will look at some particularities found only in Islam.

#### Aspects Unique to Islam

- **Worship Only in Arabic**

Muslims are required to worship in Arabic, although not all of them speak the language. It is forbidden to translate the Quran, which was originally penned in Arabic.<sup>4</sup> Printings of this Scrip-

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3 Philip Jenkins, *The Lost History of Christianity: The Thousand-year Golden Age of the Church in the Middle East, Africa and Asia — and How It Died* (2008), p. 187. Jenkins also writes: “Mosques look as they do because their appearance derives from that of Eastern Christian churches in the early days of Islam. Likewise, most of the religious practices of the believers within those mosques stem from the example of Eastern Christians, including the prostrations.... The severe self-denial of Ramadan was originally based on the Eastern practice of Lent... The Quran itself often shows startling parallels with Eastern Christian scriptures.... Only by understanding the lost Eastern Christianities can we understand where Islam comes from, and how close it is to Christianity.” (pp. 38-39)

4 “Muhammad dictated the Qur’an to his companions. After his death, it was compiled into a single document. Various versions existed until Uthman bin Affan declared one version to be the Qur’an and all other versions were destroyed.” [When Was](#)

ture in other languages are considered to be only “the meaning of the Quran.” It is ironic that the country with the largest number of Muslims in the world (Indonesia, where 12.7% of the world’s Muslims reside) does not speak Arabic, yet the Quran is recited there in Arabic and prayers are in Arabic.<sup>5</sup>

- **Organization of the Sacred Text**

The Quran is organized from the shortest chapter to the longest. It is divided into chapters (*surah*) and verses (*ayat*). Great respect is shown to the Quran. It is normally placed on a high shelf in the home in honor of its sacredness. A Muslim will make sure he has washed his hands before handling the Quran. Also, a Muslim would not fold over a page in the Quran to keep his place nor would he highlight it with a marker or write notes on a page.

- **Sharia Law**

Sharia law<sup>6</sup> plays an important role in many places where Islam is the dominant religion. Although Sharia law’s intent is to help Muslims to live in harmony and in community, the more radical teachings of Sharia are cause for concern. For example, under Sharia law the punishments for crimes include caning, stoning, and beheading. In some cases, a thief’s hand can be cut off.

Even in countries in which Islam is not the dominant religion, many Muslims are demanding that city or national governments allow Muslims to be governed and judged by Sharia law instead of by a nation’s established penal code and constitution. This often places Muslims in conflict with non-Muslims.

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[the Quran Written?](#) (learnreligions.com) Retrieved 7/7/21.

5 <https://www.pewforum.org/2010/11/04/muslim-population-of-indonesia/> Retrieved 7/7/21.

6 Islamic canonical law based on the teachings of the Qur’an and the Hadiths, or traditions of the Prophet Muhammad.

- Jihad

One outcome of Sharia law is the practice of *jihad*, which literally means struggle, (although moderate and politically correct Muslims deny that the two are linked). Alexander Pierce comments that “the majority of the thirty-six occurrences of this word in the Qur’an are in the context of warfare against non-Muslims for the purpose of expanding the rule of Islam over more people and territories.”<sup>7</sup> In recent decades the term jihad has been used to justify the machinations of Osama bin Laden, ISIS, and many Islamic terrorist groups around the world. We could entertain the possibility that the word was hijacked by these groups if it were not for the many Quranic references, which beg the question: Can we truly call Islam a religion of peace?

Bassam Madany and Shirley Madany state: “People who speak of Islam as a peaceful religion are either trying to use that kind of term in service of political correctness or are completely ignorant of both the history and the teachings of Islam.”<sup>8</sup>

Some Western professors support the idea that Islam is a pacifist religion. Many who do, however, are in academic positions sponsored by Saudi Arabia and others who wish to paint a picture of Islam that is radically different from reality.

There is another reason besides a misinterpretation of the term *jihad*<sup>9</sup> that explains why many refuse to accept that Islam is not a religion of peace and maintain that it is no different from other

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7 Alexander Pierce, *Facing Islam, Engaging Muslims* (2012).

8 Bassam Madany and Shirley Madany, *An Introduction to Islam* (2006), p. 163. See also Edward Hoskins, *A Muslim’s Mind: What Every Christian Needs to Know about the Islamic Traditions* (2011), p. 119: “Over the years many Muslims have emphasized that the primary meaning of jihad is nonviolent struggle. Unfortunately, out of the many thousands of traditions I reviewed, I found only four that offered this interpretation. The first three all equate jihad with performing the Hajj for the old, the young, the weak, and women.” See [http://www.artsandopinion.com/2008\\_v7\\_n4/madany-muslimsoldiers.htm](http://www.artsandopinion.com/2008_v7_n4/madany-muslimsoldiers.htm) Retrieved 7/7/21.

9 Jihad has been explained as an internal spiritual struggle or as warring against infidels.

world religions. Bassam Madany speaks to this sentiment in his review of Robert Spencer's book *Onward Muslim Soldiers*<sup>10</sup>:

The book has ample references to jihad in the authoritative texts of Islam: the Qur'an, Hadith...as well as in the recognized commentaries of both Sunni and Shi'ite Islam. Based on these texts and the history of the Islamic conquests in Asia, Africa, and Europe, one cannot avoid the conclusion that Jihad is part and parcel of the Islamic tradition. The reason why many of our contemporaries find it difficult to accept this fact is that they regard Islam as simply a religious faith, like Christianity, Judaism, Hinduism, Buddhism, Confucianism, and Shinto. But Islam is, and has always been, far more than a religion in the accepted sense of the word. It began as a religious faith in Mecca (610) and then it progressed into an expansionist religio-political system from Medina.

This leads us to our next main point, which has already been alluded to in the context of Sharia law and jihad: Islamic expansionism.

## ISLAMIC EXPANSIONISM

### *Historical Expansion*

Islam has always been an expansionist religion. Muhammad was as much a military warrior as he was a religious leader or prophet. What began as a desert religion around the Middle East began to expand into Africa and then into other territories. Places like Constantinople fell to Muslim invaders. The Moors from North Africa entered Europe by way of Spain and occupied that country for nearly 800 years (until the "reconquest," which began with King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella slowly forcing the Moors back into North Africa in 1492). The Ottoman Empire was another element of the

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<sup>10</sup> Robert Spencer, *Onward Muslim Soldiers: How Jihad Still Threatens America and the West* (2003), p. 622.

expansionist wave, as Islam became a threat to Eastern Orthodoxy in the Balkans. The various Crusades were attempts to reconquer Jerusalem and other cities and regions that had become Islamic possessions. Even today, the very word *crusade* causes hostile feelings among Muslims, even though the first Crusade was a defensive measure to keep Christian civilization alive.

Islamic expansion into Africa and Europe occurred between 622 and 750. "Islam was spread by fear as well as faith, by conquest as well as commerce," Madany and Madany write. "Wars of conquest expanded Islam's frontiers and every one of them was conducted under the banner of jihad.... Islam brought an end to the existence of the church in North Africa. In the Middle East, the one-time Christian majority has over the years become a small and marginalized minority."<sup>11</sup>

Jenkins points out that Turkey's Christian population dropped from 400,000 in 1020 to less than 40,000 in the early 21st century.<sup>12</sup> He further states that there is probably more persecution of Christians than apologists like to admit. "The deeply rooted Christianity of Africa and Asia did not simply fade away through the lack of zeal, or theological confusion: it was crushed in a welter of warfare and persecution."<sup>13</sup>

Not many people became Muslims by choice.<sup>14</sup> As their lands were invaded by Muslim forces, they would be killed unless they either accepted the new faith or accepted the status of second-class citizens, paying a tax called the *jiz*. Bat Ye'or coined the term *dhimmitude* to sum up this state of subjection, which he comments on extensively in his book.<sup>15</sup> Some non-Muslims in Muslim-dominat-

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11 Madany and Madany, *An Introduction to Islam*, pp. 10, 11, 15.

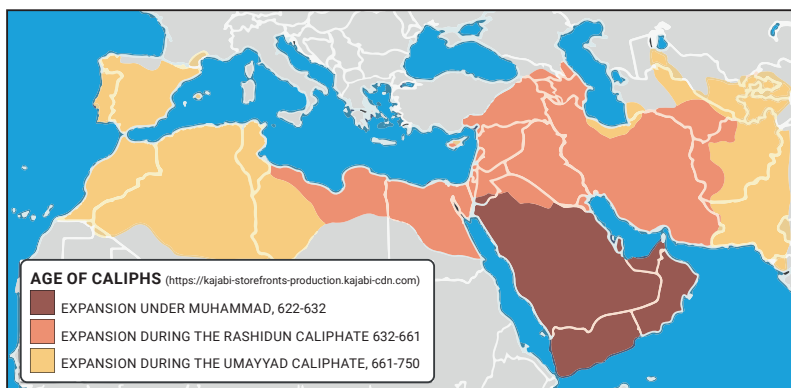
12 Jenkins, *The Lost History of Christianity*, p. 163.

13 Ibid, p. 100. Some say the number of Christians in Turkey is higher than cited in Jenkins.

14 The same could be said about Roman Catholics. See the chapter on Roman Catholicism for more on this forced conversion concept.

15 Bat Ye'or, *The Decline of Eastern Christianity Under Islam: from Jihad to Dhimmitude* (1996).

ed countries today still pay such a tax, but even in those countries where that is not the case, non-Muslims are still treated as second-class citizens. Some Christian communities such as the Copts of Egypt existed long before the Muslims invaded their country, but now are declining rapidly. Jenkins also points out the decline of the faithful in Sudan once Sharia law was imposed, and the plight of many Nigerian Christians.<sup>16</sup>



## ISLAMIC EXPANSIONISM IN THE 21ST CENTURY

Today Islam dominates the Arabian Peninsula, the Middle East, and parts of North Africa and West Africa (and is present in East Africa to a lesser extent). Muslims also are in the majority in Indonesia and Malaysia. Muslims have begun emigrating back to Europe<sup>17</sup> and can also be found in large numbers in Scandinavia, the U.S., and Latin America. The largest mosque in Latin America, for example, is in Caracas, Venezuela. By one count, over 4 million Muslims live in Latin America; Argentina has 700,000 Muslims while Brazil is said to have as many as 1.5 million. These numbers are given anecdotally as official sources vary in the extreme when it comes to actual numbers. (These numbers may be high, according to other sources.)

16 Philip Jenkins, *God's Continent: Christianity, Islam, and Europe's Religious Crisis* (2003), pp. 171-175.

17 "Back to" refers to the expulsion of Muslims from Spain, and how now Muslims through immigration are moving back into Europe.



There are about 150 million Muslims in Bangladesh and 150 million more in eastern India, Myanmar, and the Maldives combined.<sup>18</sup>

The movement by extremist groups like the Taliban and ISIS to establish a *caliphate* (Islamic state) and the terrorism conducted in Africa by such groups as Boko Haram and Al Shabaab demonstrate that political or extremist Islam is no closer today to being “a religion of peace” than it was when Islam’s expansion began in the 7th century. Some quote from the Hadiths: “The messenger of Allah said, ‘I have been commanded to fight people until they say, ‘There is no god but Allah.’”<sup>19</sup> Much of the terrorism caused by ISIS is an attempt to further expand the territory of Islam militarily and to establish a new caliphate that legitimizes the group’s existence.

In some other places, expansionism is accomplished by immigration. Libya’s former leader Muammar al-Gaddafi once said that Islam no longer needs to expand by way of military conquest; it can expand by way of immigration. This statement has proven to be true. Bruce Bawer provides ample evidence of this “migratory conquest” in his book *While Europe Slept*.<sup>20</sup> He calls this a process of *islamization*. Jenkins quotes a woman who declared, “We’re going to out-birth you.”<sup>21</sup> Others echo that sentiment, presenting a dire picture of the future for Christianity.<sup>22</sup> George Weigel, predicts a “Europe in which the muezzin summons the faithful to prayer from the central loggia of St. Peter’s in Rome, while Notre Dame has been transformed into Hagia Sophia on the Seine — a great Christian church become an Islamic museum.”<sup>23</sup>

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18 These numbers are anecdotal in nature as official sources vary widely as to actual Muslim populations.

19 Quoted in Hoskins, *A Muslim’s Mind*, p. 118.

20 Bruce Bawer, *While Europe Slept: How Radical Islam is Destroying the West from Within* (2006).

21 Jenkins, *God’s Continent*, p. 5. Note: Some would say that income level has more to do with family size than with religion (see Hans Rosling, *Factfulness*).

22 See Melanie Phillips, *Londonistan* (2007). There are many other titles that speak to the “demise” of Christianity at the rise of Islam. I do not hold to this pessimistic view due to the Book of Revelation in the Bible. I know how history ends!

23 Cited in [Bernard Lewis: Predicts Western Europe will be majority Muslim by end of century | History News Network](#), Retrieved 7/7/21, among other places.

## CULTURAL CONTEXT

### *Honor/Shame Culture*

Islam, due to its Arabic origin, is a religion which expresses itself as an honor/shame culture.<sup>24</sup> Maintaining personal or communal honor is very important. Any loss of face can result in a person's ostracism — or even death, depending on the seriousness of the offense. Honor killings are still practiced in many Muslim-dominant countries and have been carried into non-Muslim-dominant countries by conservative Muslims. Islam is not unique in dealing with issues of honor and shame. Richard Muller writes<sup>25</sup>:

All through the Bible, references are made to shame and honor in various forms. The Bible tells us to honor God, our parents, elders, Christian leaders, and government leaders. It even talks about certain things being more honorable than others. In all, there are more than 90 references to honor in the Bible, while the various forms of the word "guilt" are mentioned only forty times, and seven of these are in the New Testament.

The Bible also addresses shame, mentioning it over one hundred times. But simply counting the word 'shame' is not enough. There are many underlying principles in the Bible that deal with shame and honor, and demonstrate how God moves us from a situation of shame to that of honor.

It is important to note that even though both Muslims and Christians are concerned about honor and shame, their experience is strikingly different. A Muslim is left on his own to solve the problem of shame and restoration to honor (except when honor killings or ostracism are involved). For Christians, as Muller points out, it is "God [who] moves us from a situation of shame to that of honor."<sup>26</sup>

24 See a more in-depth study of the theme of honor/shame, fear/power in Chapter 13, "Church Planting Among Honor/Shame and Fear/Power Cultures."

25 Roland Muller, *Honor and Shame* (2000), p. 57.

26 Muller, *Honor and Shame*, p. 57. For an in-depth study of honor/shame, see Jayson Georges and Mark D. Baker, *Ministering in Honor-Shame Cultures* (2016).

Many events in recent history highlight the honor/shame culture of Islam. The *fatwa* against Salman Rushdie for his publication of *The Satanic Verses*, the global protest over the caricatures of Muhammad published in the Danish newspaper *Jyllands-Posten* in 2005, the killing of filmmaker Theo van Gogh and the subsequent writing of the book *Infidel* by the Somalian Ayaan Hirsi Ali, and news reports about honor killings of young girls in Europe and the U.S. are just some examples of honor/shame taken to an extreme in today's world.

### *Fear/Power Culture*

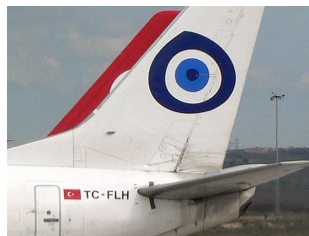
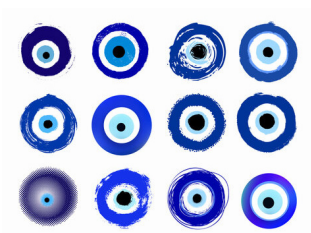
Many Muslims also live under the influence of a fear/power culture. They are practicing a folk version of Islam based more on superstitions and traditions than on the teachings of the Quran — a syncretism between scriptural content and popular beliefs and practices. This is not unique to Islam. A figure anecdotally attributed to Paul Hiebert, missiologist, states that about 75% to 85% of those who practice a world religion are practicing a folk (or popular) version of their faith.

One example in Islam is the prominence of “the evil eye.” The evil eye is defined as a glare or stare by one person which results in the other person becoming hurt, sick, or even brought to the point of death. People wear amulets to ward off this evil eye. Often the amulet consists of beads with a blue and white eye on them. The hand of Fatima (*hamsa*) is another common talisman used to ward off evil. As people enter a dark place, they may recite *Bismillah* (a blessing) to keep evil spirits at bay. Divination may be practiced as well. Tombs of certain religious leaders may be visited in the hopes of receiving some kind of *Baraka* (blessing).

Arthur Glasser writes<sup>27</sup>:

Of greater concern and preoccupation are the Muslim's efforts to cope with the various acute problems and hostile forces which crowd his world and keep him from peace of mind and heart. There is the magic he feels he must practice. And what of the demons he must placate? Or the fetishes he must not fail to use? Will his invoking of the saints help him surmount his fears? On and on. His world is dominated by the "evil eye," by sickness and death, by sorcery and curses. Not by Qur'anic Islam but by animistic Islam, and the hunger of the heart it constantly discloses.

Islam is, indeed, a syncretistic religion, blending elements of Judaism, Christianity, and animism. In fact, Scott Hendrix says that according to Martin Luther, because of this tri-partite syncretism, Islam shows itself to have "no redeemer, no forgiveness of sins, no grace, no Holy Ghost."<sup>28</sup>



Evil eye



Hand of Fatima

27 Arthur Glasser, "Power Encounter in Conversion from Islam," in *The Gospel and Islam: A 1978 Compendium*, ed. Don M. McCurry (1979), p. 137.

28 Scott Hendrix, *Martin Luther: A Very Short Introduction* (2010), p. 87.

### *Dietary Laws*

Islam has many dietary laws that govern what is considered pure or impure, similar to Jewish kosher laws. The foods acceptable for Muslims are called *halal*. Unclean foods are called *haram*. To be halal, animals must be killed ritually with a very sharp knife, oftentimes accompanied by an Arabic blessing (*Bismillah*).

Pork is not considered halal. Faithful Muslims refrain from eating pork and other haram food. Other prohibited foods include wine, animal fat, blood and blood byproducts, food dedicated to other gods, birds of prey, animals without external ears, and gelatin. As one travels through parts of the Middle East and Africa, food in airport lounges will be marked *halal* (often next to similar foods that were not prepared according to the rituals). In areas of the United States where Muslims are prevalent, you will find stores and restaurants with signs to alert Muslims to halal offerings. This is similar to places in the U.S. where Jewish people are prominent in the community and signs are posted offering kosher food. Many packaged foods also bear symbols to show that the product is halal or kosher.

## **CHALLENGES REGARDING PRACTITIONERS OF ISLAM**

We would do church planters a disservice if we said it is easy to reach Muslims for Christ. Many things work against the conversion of Muslims. Nevertheless, we know that the Holy Spirit can bring anyone into a saving knowledge of Jesus, even if it takes years. So, what are some of the challenges?

### *Different View of the Bible*

Muslims do not accept the Bible as an accurate narrative of God's will. Even though Muhammad at one time told his followers to go to "the people of the Book" (Jews and Christians) if they had questions (Quran 16: 43 and 21: 7), in practice the reality is different.

Islam teaches that the Bible is corrupt (distorted) and the Quran is the final and complete revelation from Allah. This is a form of “progressive revelation.”

This makes using the Bible in conversing with Muslims difficult, yet still necessary. There is no way, humanly speaking, that we can argue a person into the kingdom. It is the Word of God, a two-edged sword wielded by the Holy Spirit, that brings a person to faith. Otherwise, all our words and actions are to no avail.

Even though the Quran includes many of the same historical stories found in the Bible, many have been altered. This alteration was probably not intentional; it may have resulted from the fact that Muhammad did not have “the whole story” or may have been conversing with semi-informed Jews or people from a Christian sect like the Nestorians. What are some of the differences?

- In the Quran, Abraham leads Ishmael — not Isaac — up the mountain to be offered as a sacrifice. Muslims see themselves as descendants of Ishmael, not of Isaac. Muhammad claimed Ishmael as his ancestor.
- In the Quran, Allah teaches Adam the names of all the animals. In the Bible, Adam is given the authority to name the animals.
- In the Quran, Adam and Eve mutually sinned. In the Bible, Eve seduces Adam into sinning. Also, the Quran indicates that when Adam and Eve repent, Allah forgives them. In the Bible, Adam and Eve’s sin results in original sin which is subsequently transmitted to all following generations, requiring expiation by a Savior.
- The Quranic prophets are perfect and without sin. The Bible presents the prophets with all their warts and imperfections.
- In the Quran, Muslims are told that the world’s different languages are a miracle of God, a good thing. The biblical narrative says different languages came to be in order to bring about confusion among the people as a result of their pride and desire to be like God.

- The Quran makes some 70 references to itself in the first person. The Bible writers do not.
- In the Quran, Gabriel is considered a spirit, perhaps equivalent to the Holy Spirit. In the Bible, Gabriel and the Holy Spirit are different entities.

### *Unquestioned Authority of the Quran*

Criticism of Islam's sacred text is not permitted. Christians can debate the accuracy of passages in the Bible, and even make corrections to phrases as new manuscripts come to light. Not so for the Quran. It is above criticism. Quranic scholars who dare to critique the book are often considered heretics.

One of the major criticisms that could be laid at the feet of the Quran deals with inconsistencies in the text. Passages contradict each other as new revelations were handed down to Muhammad. This is explained away by use of the word *abrogation*. New revelation abrogates (replaces, supercedes) older revelations. Muslims do not regard this as illogical, and it is hard to argue the point. Arguing with a Muslim about the Quran usually does not help, anyway, just as disparaging the name of Muhammad will usually result in hostility and the shutting down of communication.

### *Misconceptions about Jesus, the Trinity, and the Crucifixion*

Muslims have a misconception about the Christian Trinity. In the Declaration of Faith (the *Shahadah*), Muslims are taught that "Allah is One." The theological concept of a God who resides in three Persons (Father, Son, and Holy Spirit) is foreign and blasphemous to monotheistic Muslims. To his credit, Muhammad brought many people out of polytheism to the worship of one God. In that process, though, Muhammad misunderstood the Trinity. In fact, most Muslims believe that the Christian Trinity consists of Father, Son, and the Virgin Mary. Unfortunately, many Muslims will begin a discourse with a Christian regarding this doctrine, shutting down

any meaningful conversation that could lead to a presentation of the gospel.

Equally difficult for Muslims to accept is the Sonship of Jesus, or even that God would have a Son. Muslims believe that Jesus was only a prophet. Jesus' ultimate role, according to Muslims, will be to point to Muhammad as God's Prophet in the end times. One can get lost in dialogue with Muslims about Jesus as the Son of God. Nevertheless, take a look at the words in Hebrews 1:1-3:

In the past God spoke to our ancestors through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days, he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom also he made the universe. The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by his powerful word. After he had provided purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty in heaven.

This passage says that Jesus was a being apart from — different from — the prophets. He is declared to be God's Son, heir of all things, and the creator of the universe. He has the radiance of God's glory. In Isaiah 42:8 we read that God shares His glory with no one. Does this not sound like the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob?

Yet another challenge is that Muslims deny that the crucifixion of Jesus took place as recorded in the Gospels. They have been taught that as a prophet, Jesus could not have been crucified, because that would bring shame upon a person. The crucifixion is explained away in one of three ways: 1) Jesus did not die on the cross, but was in a comatose state when He was taken down from it; 2) Jesus was replaced on the cross by someone else (such as Judas); or 3) the crucifixion was a mere illusion. The problem with accepting one of these positions is that without the crucifixion and subsequent death and resurrection of Jesus, there can be no expiatory atonement through the broken body and spilled blood of the Messiah.



### *Muhammad as the Last and Greatest Prophet*

Another significant challenge for church planters in Muslim contexts is that questioning the legitimacy of Muhammad as a prophet or mentioning Muhammad's name in a disparaging way is often considered blasphemy and is severely punished.

Muhammad declared by self-proclamation that he was the last and greatest of the prophets of God. The second half of the Declaration of Faith that all Muslims recite says, "and Muhammad is His prophet (or Messenger)." Many Old Testament figures, like David and Jonah, are also considered prophets, and as we said earlier, even Jesus is considered a mere prophet, subservient to Muhammad. When mentioning Muhammad's name or that of another prophet, a Muslim may end his sentence with "Peace be unto Him."

### *Fatalism*

Muslims have no assurance of salvation. Islam is basically a works-righteousness religion. If someone is a faithful observer of the five pillars, he has the probability of going to paradise. Everyone's deeds may be weighed on a balance scale. The angels who reside on either shoulder of a Muslim also give testimony to the good and bad deeds of the person. Nevertheless, a capricious God still has the final determination. There is an air of fatalism (*Inshallah*: "If God wills it"). Even Muhammad was known to have admitted he did not know for a certainty whether he was to enter paradise.<sup>29</sup>

Christians face still other challenges when desiring to minister to Muslims — but they should not be obstacles to loving Muslims with a passion to see them come to know the one true God as revealed in Jesus Christ.

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29 See Quran 46:9, Hadith Bukhari Vol. 5, Book 55, Number 266.

### *Obstacles We Often Unintentionally Impose That Make Conversion Difficult*

Some Christian practices can be a stumbling block for those we wish to bring to faith.

The fact that Christians pray and worship in a range of ways — that there are different customs in Orthodox, Roman Catholic, and Protestant denominations — can seem odd to those who are used to the Muslim form and posture of prayer. Many of the common practices in Western culture (and in Western Christianity) are offensive to Muslims, such as the eating of pork, the keeping of dogs as pets, the use of alcohol, individualism, dating rules, dress etiquette, and many other practices that fall outside of the norm for Muslims.

Even the logistics of worship are different. For men and women to sit together in a worship service (even if on opposite sides of the sanctuary) is unusual for those used to the segregation of men and women in worship. So is sitting in chairs or on pews during worship; Muslims stand and prostrate during worship. Most Christians worship together on Sunday while Muslims worship on Friday.

Worship music is foreign to Muslims. They do not sing during the times of prayer. The leader may chant a passage from the Quran, but there is no such thing as congregational singing of hymns or of other songs. No musical instruments are used in Muslim worship.

Sanctuaries of Christian churches may have stained glass windows or pictures portraying Jesus. The Quran prohibits such portrayals. Mosques are decorated only with calligraphy from the Quran. A cross in a sanctuary or worn as a necklace is also an offense to Muslims, and a stumbling block. Nevertheless, 1 Corinthians 1:18-23 says that this “foolishness,” this “stumbling block” and “offense” is central to the gospel message. Paul even says in 1 Cor. 2:2: “For I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified.” Also, in Galatians 6:14, we read, “May I never

boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ.”

Although Muslims respect Jesus, using the word Christ or Christians in conversations with Muslims may offend them. This dates back to the Crusades and the long memory Muslims have of those events. Muslims would have trouble with passages like Acts 11:26: “The disciples were called Christians first at Antioch.”

Taking some of these differences into account, or even explaining the differences, may lessen the obstacles. We certainly don’t want to “soft sell” the gospel nor fall into the error of syncretism (over-contextualization). Our goal is to see our Muslim neighbor come to understand the true Jesus. Nevertheless, we need to recognize those practices, dietary restrictions, and the like that may be obstacles to meaningful conversation. The truth remains: “Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among mankind by which we must be saved” (Acts 4:12).

### *Best Practices for Sharing Your Faith in Muslim Contexts*

We have looked at challenges to sharing our faith with Muslims. Some are rooted in the way Christians practice their faith. Others are major differences between Muslim and Christian understandings of such things as the Trinity, the Sonship of Jesus, and the veracity of the Bible. These can appear to be giant obstacles, impossible to overcome. Many Christians, faced with these challenges and the “strangeness” of those who are different from themselves, give up before ever venturing to witness “in season and out of season” (2 Timothy 4:2) to practitioners of this world religion. Here are some strategies.

### *Loving Engagement*

There exists a lot of fear and mistrust between Muslims and Christians. The first step is to overcome it. It is always good to develop a relationship with this other person, if possible, before pro-

ceeding. We have an example of Jesus' methodology of confronting a person with the truth. Alexander Pierce looks at the historical narrative of Jesus with the Samaritan woman at the well in John 4 and points out five principles that we can learn from Jesus about how to approach people with the truth. Pierce calls this method "loving engagement."<sup>30</sup>

1. *Talk to them.* Sometimes people are taken aback if we simply begin conversing with them. They don't expect it, especially from someone who is different from them. And yet, as humans, most of us enjoy engaging in conversation with others, even if we are suspicious of their motives.
2. *Run up the flag early (and test it early on).* Jesus was quick to bring up spiritual matters with the Samaritan woman. He did not beat around the bush. "Muslims expect that 'People of the Book' will talk about spiritual things. Islam is a very important part of their identity and they are not ashamed to talk about it."<sup>31</sup> Likewise, Paul declares, "I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God that brings salvation to everyone who believes" (Romans 1:16).
3. *Do not argue.* A Muslim may challenge the Trinity or the Sonship of Jesus, or say that "the Bible is full of errors." The Samaritan woman brought up some controversial topics, too, but Jesus did not argue with her. It is counterproductive. We are called to engage each person in conversation. We want to build a bridge for being able to share what is on our heart.
4. *Do not compromise.* Jesus did not hem and haw over what was politically correct or what might be offensive. He responded directly to the Samaritan woman's comments by pointing out that "Salvation is from the Jews."<sup>32</sup> We should hold our ground firmly, but with love. Muslims can be firm in their beliefs and

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30 Pierce, *Facing Islam, Engaging Muslims*, pp. 113-117.

31 Ibid, p. 115.

32 Ibid, p. 116.

often find Christians wishy-washy in their attempt not to offend. Then they wonder if we truly believe what we say.

5. *Point to the Messiah.* Jesus' final response to the woman was, "I who speak to you am he." We must always point our Muslim friend to Jesus — the true Jesus of the Bible, not the erroneous Jesus of the Quran.

Madany and Madany put it more emphatically<sup>33</sup>:

[A] Christian must insist that Jesus Christ is not simply a prophet who gave mankind another law, but the unique savior and emancipator of mankind. The salvation He accomplished required His vicarious death on the cross and His mighty resurrection from the dead. The high Christology of John 1, Colossians 1, and Hebrews 1, must form an integral part of our witness to the followers of other religions.

Before looking at some practical tools and approaches to reaching Muslims, let's discuss some recommendations about how to develop a relationship with your Muslim neighbor.

### *Seven Do's and Dont's*

Carl Medearis shares a list of "21 Dos and Don'ts."<sup>34</sup> Here are a few of them.

Don't...

- attack the person of Muhammad, or the Quran.
- eat in public during Ramadan.
- walk in front of a praying Muslim.

33 Pierce, *Facing Islam, Engaging Muslims*, p. 116.

34 Carl Medearis, *Muslims, Christians and Jesus* (2008), pp. 172-174.

But by all means, do...

- ask a Muslim what he believes. Do not assume you know. This gives you, then, the opportunity to likewise share your faith.
- offer to pray for your Muslim friends, such as praying a blessing or for a situation he or she may be facing.
- treat the Bible with total respect, in the same way as a Muslim shows respect for the Qur'an.
- be a good listener. In this way you gain the right to share.
- recognize the sincerity of the Muslim as he/she prays, practices fasting, abstains from alcohol, and restrains from eating certain foods.

### *Hospitality*

Invite your neighbor to your home for a meal. Hospitality in an informal setting breaks down barriers, lowers suspicions, and opens the way for seeing each other as humans with similar needs, concerns, and aspirations.

Be sure to offer halal food, staying away from pork and alcohol. Stating that the food is halal puts your neighbor at ease and helps him to save face, knowing he will not be offered something haram. If the visit with your neighbor falls near an Islamic holiday, ask your neighbor to explain to you what the holiday is and how it is celebrated.

Find things you have in common (a passion for soccer, children in the same school, etc.) and use these to develop the relationship. Provide recent immigrants with needed services like rides to medical appointments, getting acquainted with social services, finding supermarkets, and other things a newcomer needs to know.

### *Access Multiplication Network's Resources*

In addition to these practical tips, there are specific tools available to use as you engage Muslims. Multiplication Network's Module M training has listed a series of tools in sessions 5 and 6 which could be utilized. These have proven to be best practices in some cases. You can find Module M at <http://toolbox.multiplicationnetwork.org/> (type Module M into the search window). However, no single tool will serve all contexts. Every tool needs to be preceded by and continually bathed in prayer, asking for the Holy Spirit's illumination in the heart of the recipient.



Multiplication Network also has prepared a series of 10 Bible studies based on the worldviews of honor/shame and fear/power cultures. They can be used individually or in a group setting. These also can be downloaded from the same website, <http://toolbox.multiplicationnetwork.org/> under Module M.

## CONCLUSION

Much more could be said regarding Islam and about reaching out to Muslims. This chapter can only serve to whet your appetite if you find yourself in a context that includes Muslims. May you be led by the Spirit to discern how best to proceed, armed with the Word of God and going under the power of the Holy Spirit. It is not by argument that anyone will come to faith in Jesus; it is by the declaring of the truth. "The truth will set you free" (John 8:32).

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What surprised you as you read this chapter? What new thing did you learn about Islam or Muslims in general?
2. What misinformation was clarified in this chapter?
3. How should a Christian treat the dietary laws of a Muslim when inviting him into his home for a meal?
4. How fruitful is it to debate with a Muslim regarding the Prophet Muhammad or other controversial points? Explain.
5. Explain how John 4 (Jesus and the Samaritan woman at the well) can guide you as you seek to witness to another person.
6. Explain how you would approach the subject of assurance of salvation to one who does not have that same assurance.

## PERSONAL NOTES

*Please use this space for writing your own reflection or a prayer regarding the content of this chapter.*

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# Church Planting in the Context of Judaism

*Wes Taber*

*ESV is used in this chapter.*

## INTRODUCTION

Imagine you live on a remote island and have never heard of the Bible. One day, while walking along you find a bottle on the beach. On a scrap of paper stuffed inside are these words: “For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek.” (Ro. 1:16).

Likely you would have all kinds of questions. *What is this gospel that has the power to bring salvation? Who is God? And what is a Jew? What is a Greek?*

Thankfully, you, dear reader, do have a Bible. That Bible tells you who God is. It explains the gospel that brings eternal life to all who believe.

Your Bible also tells the story of the Jewish people. In fact, the Holy Spirit inspired Jewish authors to write our Scriptures. We would have to misread the Bible to miss the key role the Jewish peo-

ple play in history and in God’s plan to redeem sinners. The Lord Jesus, who was born of a Jewish virgin, said, “Salvation is from the Jews” (John 4:22).

## WHO IS A JEW?

The Book of Genesis records the beginning of the story of the Jewish people. In Genesis 11 we are introduced to a man named Abram who lived in Ur<sup>1</sup> around 4,000 years ago.

In Genesis 12:1-3, God tells Abram to leave his country and family and go to the land God would show him. In addition to gaining a new land<sup>2</sup> (then known as Canaan), Abram will receive from the Lord many descendants (“a great nation”) and great blessings.

Abram is one of many individuals God would call to serve Him. God has given many blessings, including multiplied offspring, to many people over the generations. But God’s promise to Abram was unique: “In you all the families of the earth will be blessed” (Gen. 12:3).

Think of how big that promise is. What could you possibly invent that would be a blessing to all the earth? What deed could you perform that would have a global impact?

We don’t know what Abram understood of the scope of God’s blessings. But he certainly had some insights. In Genesis 17 God changed his name from Abram (“exalted father”) to Abraham (“father of many”). Abraham’s descendants would give the world the Bible. The One who would redeem us from our sins is “the son of David, the son of Abraham” (Matt. 1:1). Jesus said, “Your father Abraham rejoiced to see My day, and he saw it and was glad” (John 8:56).

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1 A town in modern-day Iraq.

2 “The land which I will show you” of Genesis 12 becomes the “promised land” in Genesis 15. God “cuts a covenant” with Abraham, unconditionally promising the land — with defined borders — to his descendants forever.

We consider Abraham to be the father of the Jewish people. In his lifetime, however, he was known as “Abraham the Hebrew.”<sup>3</sup>

God’s line of promise through Abraham’s descendants is traced through Isaac and Jacob. (Gen. 21:12; 25:23). The Book of Genesis records the growth of the family. God gave Jacob 12 sons and changed his name to Israel. (Gen. 29-30 and 35:18; 32:28.) Scripture often refers to “the sons [or children] of Israel”; *Israelite*<sup>4</sup> is also used. These terms refer to the direct descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob/Israel to whom God made such special promises. In fact, God refers to Himself as “the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.” (Ex. 3:6,15,16; 4:5.)

So far we have seen the terms *Hebrew* and children of Israel applied to the people God uniquely blessed. But where does the term *Jew*<sup>5</sup> come from?

We have to “fast forward” from the Patriarchal Period<sup>6</sup> about 1,000 years. In the days of the Prophet Samuel the Hebrew people were living in the Promised Land of Canaan. They chose Saul to be their first king. David succeeded Saul as king and expanded the boundaries of the Kingdom of Israel. His son Solomon built the Temple where sacrifices were offered to the God of Israel.

But when Solomon died, there was a “tax revolt.” Solomon’s son Rehoboam continued to rule the territory of Judah and Benjamin. The 10 northern tribes become the Kingdom of Israel. It is during this period of the divided kingdom that we find the first mention

3 The term *Hebrew* is commonly used in Genesis and Exodus to refer to Abraham’s extended family. In Samuel’s day, the Philistines refer to the *Hebrews*. Jeremiah uses the term twice in chapter 34, and Jonah declares, “I am a Hebrew” (Jonah 1:9).

4 Leviticus 24:10-11, for example. Today the term *Israeli* designates nationality, not ethnicity; that is, an Israeli is a citizen of the modern State of Israel. Not all Jewish people are Israelis, and not all Israeli citizens are Jewish.

5 You may have noticed we use the term *Jew* sparingly, preferring the term *Jewish people*. This is purely a matter of sensitivity. In the mouths of Gentiles, *Jew* often sounds negative — likely because historically it has been accompanied by a sneer and an unkind adjective: “cheap Jew,” “dirty Jew,” “Christ-killing Jew,” and worse.

6 The Patriarchal Period begins in Genesis 12 with the call of Abram and ends with the death of Joseph in Chapter 50.



of “the Jews,”<sup>7</sup> referring to those living in the southern Kingdom of Judah. The first individual in Scripture identified as “a Jew” is Mordecai. (Esth. 2:5 and 3:4, e.g.) Though from Judah, he is an exile in Babylon.

Today, the majority of Jewish religious leaders define a *Jew* as someone having a Jewish mother. In contrast, the Bible traces genealogies through the father. Adding to the confusion about Jewish identity, some use a religious definition:<sup>8</sup> “A Jew is someone who practices Judaism.”

But for our purposes, anyone who is a physical descendant of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob can rightfully claim status as a Jew. When we talk about reaching Jewish people with the gospel, it is helpful to recognize that there are important differences in culture, language, and religious practices among them. Many adjectives are applied to distinguish various sub-groups: “French Jew,” “secular Jew,” “Sephardic Jew,” “Orthodox Jew,” etc.

## THE CHOSEN PEOPLE

Jews are often referred to as “the chosen people.” Sometimes even Jewish people are uncomfortable with this term. Is there a biblical basis for such a title?

We already have referenced the special promises God made to Abraham and his descendants in Genesis 12:1-3. Several times, God repeats His promise to Abraham regarding “a great nation.” They will be “as the dust of the earth” and “the stars of the heavens and the sand on the seashore.” (Gen. 13:16; 15:5; 22:17, for example.)

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7 2 Kings 25:25 refers to the inhabitants of the Kingdom of Judah as the Jews. The term is found more often beginning with the return of the Jewish exiles from Babylon as recorded in Ezra and Nehemiah

8 The Pew Research Center discusses the challenge of defining “Jewishness” here: <https://www.pewforum.org/2013/10/01/sidebar-who-is-a-jew/>

The Book of Exodus is important for understanding God's special relationship with the Jewish people. The story opens with the Hebrews living as slaves in Egypt. The people cry out to God for help. He sends Moses to deliver them. But Pharaoh, Egypt's ruler, doesn't want to free his laborers.

How does God redeem His people? He doesn't make Moses a successful military leader. He doesn't send a disease to kill all the Egyptians. Instead, He brings a series of 10 powerful plagues on the land of Egypt. He explains, "Against all the gods of Egypt I will execute judgments" (Ex. 12:12).

The Egyptians had all kinds of gods. They worshiped the Nile River, a source of fertility. The sun was a god. There was a cow god and a storm god. In plague after plague, God demonstrated to the Egyptians (and the Hebrews!) that He was more powerful. Indeed, He is the one true God.<sup>9</sup>

Pharaoh himself was worshiped. In the final plague, the firstborn son in every home was killed by God. Pharaoh's oldest son, the heir to the throne and "deity next in line," was slain. Finally, Egypt's ruler was willing to release the Hebrews. But in a moment of regret he sent his army to bring back his slave laborers. God closed the Red Sea around Pharaoh and his troops, obliterating them. God's rescued people sang praises for His deliverance (Ex. 15).

This is not the only story of God's triumph over pagan gods. But we especially should pay attention to the Exodus record for several important reasons.

- It continues the story of Abraham. Centuries before the Exodus, God told Abram, "Know for certain that your descendants will be strangers in a land that is not theirs, where they will be enslaved and oppressed four hundred years. But I will also judge

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<sup>9</sup> Scripture is clear that while idols in themselves are nothing (1 Cor. 8:4), worshipping them and the false gods they represent is connected to worship of demonic powers; see Leviticus 17:17; Deuteronomy 32:16-17.

the nation whom they will serve, and afterward they will come out with many possessions” (Gen. 15:13-14).<sup>10</sup>

- The Exodus is the point in history when God “officially adopts” the Jewish people. For the first time God refers to the descendants of Jacob/Israel as “My people” (Exo. 3:7).<sup>11</sup> God makes it clear that “the chosen people” did not choose Him; rather He chose<sup>12</sup> them while they were enslaved in Egypt (Ezek. 20:5-6).
- God often refers to His redemption of the Hebrews as evidence of His care for them. For example, at Mount Sinai He begins the giving of the Ten Commandments with these words: “I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery” (Ex. 20:2).<sup>13</sup>
- God also starts the Jewish calendar with Passover (Ex. 12:2, 17). Throughout their generations, Jewish people have remembered how God spared the firstborn sons of Hebrews from death when lamb’s blood was applied to the doorposts and lintels of their homes.

Perhaps by this time you are wondering, *I want to learn how to share the gospel with Jewish people. Why the history lesson?*

Great question! The answer is that we have tremendous advantages when telling Jewish people about Jesus. Here are a few:

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10 Just as God’s promise to Abraham was fulfilled in every detail, we should expect all His promises to His people will be! We also see God provide in unique ways. The riches the Egyptians gave to the escaping Hebrews (Exodus 12:36) included the materials that would be used for building the Tabernacle where God would dwell among His people in the wilderness.

11 That phrase is the translation of the Hebrew word *ami*. God will use that special term 130 times in the Old Testament. In every instance but one (Isaiah 19:25, where the prophetic future is in view) God is speaking to or about the Jewish people.

12 Deuteronomy 7:6-8 is the clearest expression that indeed the Jewish people are God’s “chosen people.” Note that it was not some inherent goodness in Israel that merited God’s favor (“for you were the fewest of all peoples”). Rather, the descendants of Jacob were chosen a) “because the LORD loved you” and b) “kept the oath which He swore” to the patriarchs.

13 See also 29:46, Leviticus 11:45, 19:36, 25:38; Numbers 15:41, Deuteronomy 5:6, and Psalm 81:10.

- The Bible is a Jewish book. Both the Old<sup>14</sup> and New Testaments<sup>15</sup> were written by Jewish men.<sup>16</sup>
- The Hebrew prophets foretold of the Messiah<sup>17</sup> who would come to redeem Israel.
- All the first followers of Jesus, beginning with the 12 disciples, were Jewish.
- Although many of the Jewish people, including the majority of religious leaders in Jesus' day, rejected Him, God has not rejected His people (Rom. 11:1-2a).
- Just as the gospel is (present tense) "the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes," it is (present tense) "to the Jew first" (Rom. 1:16).
- In Ephesians 2 the Apostle Paul gives us "the blueprint for the Church." Gentiles (non-Jews), who once were far from God, have been brought near by Jesus' atoning sacrifice. Today He is making the two (Jews and gentiles) into "one new man" in the Body of Christ.

## THE HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT OF JUDAISM

Many Christians think that Jews believe in the God of Abraham and follow the religion of Moses. While that certainly is true of some Jewish people, we need to understand the wider picture.

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14 The Jewish people refer to the Hebrew Scriptures by the acronym *Tanakh*. Comprised of three sections (*Torah*/Pentateuch, *Nevi'im*/Prophets and *Ketuvim*/Writings), the *Tanakh* contains the same 39 books as that Christian Bibles call the Old Testament. However, some of the books are in a different order, and some verse numbering is different than in Christian Bibles.

15 When we refer to the New Testament as the *New Covenant* we preserve the intended meaning of *Testament* and connect with the reality that God promised a new covenant to "the house of Israel and the house of Judah" (Jeremiah 31:31-37).

16 Some question whether "Dr. Luke," author of the Gospel of Luke and the Acts of the Apostles, was Jewish, because he had a Greek name. It was not uncommon for Jewish people to have a Greek as well as Hebrew name: Matthew/Levi, Simon/Peter and Saul/Paul. If not Jewish by blood, he likely was a God-fearing proselyte.

17 We get our English word Messiah from the Hebrew word *Mashiach*, which means "anointed." *Christ* is the equivalent term, coming from the Greek New Testament word *Christos*.

The term Judaism is not found at all in the Old Testament and only twice in the New (Gal. 1:13-14). Yes, “the Jewish religion” has its roots in the Torah, but no one today keeps the law as God gave it through Moses.<sup>18</sup>

Further, like most religions, Judaism evolved over the centuries. At Mount Sinai, God set aside the tribe of Levi for special duties and commanded the family of Aaron (Moses’ brother) to serve as priests. In the period of Israel’s monarchy, scribes were introduced.<sup>19</sup>

It is important to understand how the Jewish religious system developed during the time of the Babylonian captivity<sup>20</sup> and through the Intertestamental Period.<sup>21</sup> With no Temple as a center for worship and sacrifice, new practices were developed. The synagogue (which is not mentioned in the Old Testament) became the center for Torah study.

When Ezra read aloud the Torah to the exiles who had returned from Babylon, the scribes had to translate the Hebrew into Aramaic (Nehemiah. 8:1-8). This opened the door for religious teachers to not only give the meaning of the text but also give explanations which expanded upon it.

At the time the Gospel accounts took place, the priests and scribes were still functioning. But a new class of religious leaders, the rabbis, trained disciples. Jesus Himself is addressed as “Rabbi” because devoted followers looked to Him as their spiritual guide.

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18 A sizeable portion of God’s Law concerns the Tabernacle/Temple with its functioning priesthood and sacrificial system, none of which exists today.

19 First mentioned in 1 Chronicles 2:55. Ezra the scribe was “skilled in the Law of Moses” (Ezra 7:6). In addition to writing sacred texts, scribes functioned as Torah teachers and legal experts.

20 Babylonian exile began with Nebuchadnezzar’s conquest of Jerusalem in 605 B.C. Persia’s King Cyrus signed the edict in 536 B.C. allowing Jewish exiles to return, but only a remnant went back to Judea.

21 The final books of the Old Testament were written about 400 years before the time of Jesus.

As we read the Bible we also are introduced to other new Jewish groups.<sup>22</sup> In Jesus' day the Sadducees were the religious elite, controlling the Temple and its services. The Sadducees might be compared to theological liberals today. They did not believe in angelic beings, the supernatural, or resurrection.<sup>23</sup>

The Pharisees, though comparatively few in number, draw considerable attention in the New Testament. As a member of Israel's strictest religious party, the Apostle Paul (Acts 26:5; Phil. 3:5) is perhaps the best-known Pharisee. The Lord Jesus had many interactions with these "fundamentalists of Judaism." In one encounter, they ask Him, "Why do Your disciples not walk according to the tradition of the elders, but eat their bread with impure [unwashed] hands?" (Matt. 15:2).<sup>24</sup>

Jesus' response gives us insight. He charges the Pharisees with neglecting God's commands and replacing His Law with their traditions (Mark 7:6-13). Over the centuries a very large amount of the "traditions of the elders" had been developing. This body of rabbinic interpretations and instructions was transmitted orally so as not to be confused with Scripture. But over time, the "Oral Law/Torah" became the primary authority in daily life.

This is a very significant point for our understanding: "Rabbinic Judaism" (the religion developed by the rabbis in the past 2,000-plus years) has significantly changed from the instructions God gave through Moses at Mount Sinai. This is true for two major reasons:

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22 For example, we read about *zealots*, nationalists with a desire to overthrow Roman rule. The New Testament doesn't mention other groups, like the Essenes, who we learn about from other historical sources.

23 Acts 23:8, for instance. The Sadducees disappear from the scene after their center of power, the Temple, was destroyed by the Romans in 70 A.D.

24 We should be very careful how we read the Scriptures in light of history. Much of the Bible was written initially "by Jews to Jews." Sadly, since the fourth century A.D. we have far too many examples of Christians using the Bible to justify anti-Jewish attitudes and actions. While some Pharisees were opponents of the gospel, others were used of God to preserve a high view of Scripture. Nicodemus is an example of those Pharisees who sought truth.

- The written Torah does not address every detail of life. God gives explicit instructions for some things (such as construction of the Tabernacle, sacrifices, and priestly duties) and general guidelines for others. But many aspects of daily living are not addressed. For example, God prohibits work on *Shabbat* (the Sabbath) — but doesn't define work. The rabbis developed a list of 39 categories of activities prohibited on Shabbat.<sup>25</sup>
- The priesthood and sacrificial system abruptly ceased when the Second Temple was destroyed in 70 A.D. Prayer, repentance, and keeping the commandments (including the Oral Torah) became the focus of Jewish religious practice. With the Sanhedrin disbanded, the rabbis become the ultimate authorities, issuing rulings on daily life down to the smallest details.

After the destruction of the Second Temple, the *Torah b'al peh* (Oral Law) began to be written down. The *Mishnah*, the earliest collection of rabbinic rulings, was compiled by Judah ha Nasi around 200 A.D. The *Gemara*, a second “layer” of comments on the *Mishnah*, was collected around 500 A.D. These two are combined in the *Babylonian Talmud*,<sup>26</sup> which provides the foundation for observant Jewish life to this day.

## UNDERSTANDING JUDAISM TODAY

Over the centuries many rabbis and philosophers have influenced Jewish religious thought. Among those most widely quoted are Rashi<sup>27</sup> (1040-1105) and Maimonides (1135-1204).<sup>28</sup> Some small divisions with-

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25 *Mishnah Shabbat* 7:2.

26 As indicated by its name, the *Babylonian Talmud* was authored by rabbis living in exile. (Only a remnant of Jewish captives returned to Israel in the days of Ezra and Nehemiah. Babylon remained a center of Jewish life and learning for generations.) A second set of volumes, the *Jerusalem Talmud*, was compiled 200 years earlier by rabbis living in Tiberias. The *Mishnah* portions are similar; the Jerusalem *Gemara* is briefer and not considered as authoritative. For English translations of the *Talmud* and many other rabbinic writings, see [www.sefaria.org](http://www.sefaria.org)

27 Rashi is an acronym for Rabbi Shlomo Yitzhaki. A French Jew, Rashi wrote highly-respected commentaries on every tractate of the Talmud.

28 Rabbi Moses ben Maimon is known by the acronym “the Rambam.” A court physician in Egypt, Maimonides is noted for authoring *Mishneh Torah*, the 13 Principles of Faith, and *The Guide for the Perplexed*.

in Jewish communities have occurred over doctrine or practices.<sup>29</sup> A significant split occurred in European Jewry in the 1700s. A rabbi who was called the Baal Shem Tov<sup>30</sup> is credited as the founder of Hasidism. His followers spread his message of living joyful lives while strictly observing *halakha*.<sup>31</sup> The Hasidim are noted for revering their *rebbe*s<sup>32</sup> as mediators before God, and for an attraction to mysticism.<sup>33</sup>

The devout Jewish establishment strongly opposed the emerging Hasidic movement. A leading voice for mainstream observant Judaism was the Vilna Gaon of Lithuania.<sup>34</sup> To counteract the Hasidic emphasis on “experiencing God” in daily life, their opponents established *yeshivas* for intensive Torah studies. To this day “Lithuanian Jews” are noted for their religious scholarship.

Together the Hasidic and Lithuanian Jews are considered *Haredim*, or ultra-Orthodox. While they still have marked differences, they are united in their commitment to strictly follow *halakha*. The ultra-Orthodox are the easiest to identify by their clothing: black suits, white shirts, and ever-present *kippah*s<sup>35</sup> for males; very modest long-sleeved dark-colored dresses for females, with wigs and head coverings for married women. *Haredi* Jews must be able to walk to their synagogues on Shabbat and have easy access to kosher food sources. They most often choose to live in community with others who follow the Oral Law closely.

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29 As one example, the Karaite movement began in eighth-century Persia. Karaites reject the Oral Torah and many Jewish traditions, holding only to the written Scriptures as authoritative. An estimated 30,000 Karaites exist today, mostly in two communities in Israel.

30 Rabbi Israel ben Eliezer (1698-1760), also known as Master of the Good Name (“the Besht”), was born in Poland.

31 *Halakha* refers to the right way of strictly observing the Oral Torah, thus pleasing God by fulfilling all the commandments as interpreted by the rabbis.

32 A *rebbe* is revered as a great spiritual leader. Hasidic sects sprang up throughout Europe, and became known by the name of their hometowns (e.g., Ger, Satmar, Lubavitch, Bobov, and Breslov are among the best known today).

33 The most widely influential mystical works are the *Zohar* (published in the 1200s) and *Kabbalah*, written by Rabbi Isaac Luria (1534-1572).

34 Rabbi Elijah ben Solomon Zalman (1720-1797) of Vilnius was one of the leaders seeking to root out Hasidism.

35 Skullcaps (*kippot* in Hebrew, *yarmulkes* in Yiddish) are continuously worn by ultra-Orthodox males. Some even wear them when sleeping.



Some pious Jewish people wish to live an Orthodox lifestyle but are not concerned about preserving the dress code of previous centuries. A “Modern Orthodox” man may wear a knitted skullcap and more casual clothing; his wife may wear a colorful, but modest, long-sleeved dress. They maintain a high level of *kashrut*, avoiding pork and not eating meat with dairy products at the same meal. Orthodox Jews keep the Sabbath and the men follow the daily routine of morning, afternoon, and evening prayers.

In the wake of the European Enlightenment of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, German Jews found new opportunities to be accepted in gentile society. A new religious movement, Reform Judaism, took a marked departure from Orthodoxy. Rabbi Abraham Geiger<sup>36</sup> began to adapt Jewish practices to the modern world.

Strict observance of religious laws was abandoned by Reform Jews. Eating only kosher food and keeping the Sabbath were obstacles to participating in the wider community. Men chose to wear a *yarmulke* for religious rites only. Men and women adopted the dress of secular society. Reform synagogues adopted new practices, replacing Hebrew with German in some services and introducing instrumental music.

Reform Judaism joined the broader stream of “higher criticism,” judging the Hebrew Scriptures to be more a collection of folklore and legends than the inspired, authoritative Word of God. Over time traditional moral lines were erased. Today Reform Judaism openly accepts the homosexual lifestyle and supports abortion rights.

The lessening of rules and restrictions combined with the ability to more easily fit into the non-Jewish world proved attractive to many. Reform Judaism was exported from Western Europe to Jewish communities around the world.

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36 German rabbi Abraham Geiger (1810-1874) is considered the founder of Reform Judaism.

Conservative Judaism traces its roots to the teachings of Rabbi Zecharias Frankel.<sup>37</sup> He was open to gaining knowledge from secular sources, such as history and archaeology, as he attempted to navigate the gap between Orthodoxy and Reform Judaism. He kept what he considered the essentials of Jewish religious faith and practice (for instance, honoring *halakha* and maintaining Hebrew liturgy), but allowed for certain changes (such as that women can be rabbis).

Like Frankel, Rabbi Solomon Schechter<sup>38</sup> combined yeshiva studies with a broader education. He is considered the founder of “made in the USA” Conservative Judaism.

We have covered what may be considered mainstream Judaism, from the most conservative and traditional (the *Haredim*) to the more liberal Reform movement. We have mentioned the Karaites as a small splinter group from the past.

A smaller sect, Reconstructionist Judaism, began in the 1920s.<sup>39</sup> This group sees itself as intentionally recreating Judaism as a moral and ethical way of living. Values like pursuing justice and caring for the environment emphasize “doing Jewish” as more important than “being Jewish.”

We conclude this overview of Jewish religious expression with the reality that more Jewish people are secular than religious. The experience of many is that they connect with their identity as Jews mostly through holidays — perhaps having a family gathering at Passover or lighting Hanukkah candles. In recent generations, once

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37 Rabbi Zecharias Frankel (1801-1875) was born in Prague, studied in a secular university in Budapest, and taught in Bohemia, Germany, and Poland.

38 Born to a Hasidic family in Moldavia and educated in Vienna and Berlin, Rabbi Solomon Schechter (1847-1915) taught at Cambridge University before moving to America to preside over Jewish Theological Seminary.

39 Reconstructionist Judaism began as a branch within Conservative Judaism. Rabbi Mordecai Kaplan (1881-1983) is considered to be its founder. Kaplan’s journey away from the truth, like so many others, began with questioning the inspiration of Scripture. (See <https://www.reconstructingjudaism.org/document/childs-biography-mordecai-kaplan>.)

they have completed their *bar mitzvah*<sup>40</sup> many Jewish people in recent generations have only attended synagogue for a wedding or perhaps on Yom Kippur (the Day of Atonement).<sup>41</sup>

Jewish people are represented across the religious spectrum. As noted above, some are active in a form of Judaism, from the very observant *Haredim* to the more liberal versions. But in Israel and the diaspora, more Jewish people have fully embraced a secular lifestyle devoid of religion than are practicing a form of Judaism. Many profess atheism or are drawn toward Eastern religions<sup>42</sup> and the New Age.

Thankfully, a growing number of Jewish people are finding faith<sup>43</sup> in the Jewish Messiah, Yeshua.<sup>44</sup> Some join denominational or independent churches. Others find spiritual homes in Messianic congregations which preach the gospel of Yeshua while remaining connected to their Jewish heritage — celebrating life-cycle events

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40 During the Middle Ages Judaism developed the practice of marking the entrance of a boy to manhood at age 13. *Bar mitzvah* literally means “son of the commandment” in Aramaic. At this time a young man becomes personally responsible to keep the commands of Torah (and the rabbis) and is given the right to fully participate in synagogue services. Historically, girls were viewed as coming of age at age 12, but it was not marked with a special ceremony until the twentieth century. The first bat mitzvah (“daughter of the commandment”) was conducted in 1922 for Mordecai Kaplan’s daughter in New York. Today, Orthodox and Conservative Jewish girls celebrate their bat mitzvahs at 12; in Reform Judaism, both *bar* and *bat mitzvahs* are at age 13.

41 “There is I think in religious and “secular” Jewish people alike a sense of wanting to bring Shalom on earth. On being agents of peace and renewal and reconciliation. I think there leaves many connections for Christians to reach out....Modern-day cultural Jews may claim not to have organization religious ties but definitely have Jewish religious principles deeply embedded in the way that they were raised. Not necessarily the Judaism of the OT but definitely more modern religious Jewish principles which are covered but not as fully as they could be.” (Editor’s notes.)

42 Sufficient numbers of Jewish people, including some notable actors and musicians, have adopted Buddhist practices for a name to be applied: “BuJews” (Buddhist Jews). For some, this term is pejorative in concept.

43 For video testimonies in English of Messianic Jews, see “Stories of Shalom” at <https://insearchofshalom.com/> and <https://www.oneforisrael.org/category/bible-based-teaching-from-israel/video/jewish-testimonies-i-met-messiah/>; Israeli Hebrew testimonies: <https://www.oneforisrael.org/category/bible-based-teaching-from-israel/video/israeli-testimonies/>

44 Jesus’ name has variations in many languages, but in obedience to the instruction of the Lord’s angel (Matthew 1:20-21) His parents named Him Yeshua, which means “salvation.”

and Jewish holidays and following customs adopted from the synagogue's pattern of service, such as reading the weekly portion from the Torah scroll.

### *Demographics*

While a remnant of Jewish people has always lived in “the Holy Land” promised by God, for two millennia the majority have lived in the *diaspora*.<sup>45</sup> Jewish communities in countries such as Iran, Yemen and Egypt endured throughout the centuries.

Two larger subdivisions of Jewish people based on geography are the *Ashkenazim* and *Sephardim*.

- *Sephardic Jews* trace their roots to Spain and Portugal. Their Spanish-based language, Ladino, is written in Hebrew. When they were expelled from the Iberian Peninsula starting in the 1400s, many fled to North Africa and South America. When Jews of North Africa were forced to leave after Israel became a state in 1948, many moved to Israel.
- *Ashkenazi Jews* trace their roots to Western and Central Europe. The mother tongue of some (today, primarily *haredi* communities) is Yiddish, a language based in German but written with Hebrew letters. The majority of the Jewish people killed in the Holocaust were Ashkenazi. Like the Sephardim, the Ashkenazim have scattered across the globe. Large populations live in the United States and Israel.

The most recent available statistics from reliable studies<sup>46</sup> show that in 2018, the world's Jewish population was 14,606,000. In that

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<sup>45</sup> *Diaspora* refers to Jewish individuals living outside Israel. In Acts 2:5 we read of “Jews, devout men from every nation under heaven” who were living in Jerusalem. Paul witnessed in synagogues on his missionary journeys throughout Asia Minor and Europe.

<sup>46</sup> Berman Jewish Databank: [https://www.jewishdatabank.org/content/upload/bjdb/2018-World\\_Jewish\\_Population\\_\(AJYB,\\_DellaPergola\)\\_DB\\_Final.pdf](https://www.jewishdatabank.org/content/upload/bjdb/2018-World_Jewish_Population_(AJYB,_DellaPergola)_DB_Final.pdf). For population by country, see [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jewish\\_population\\_by\\_country](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jewish_population_by_country)

year, Israel's Jews numbered 6,558,100<sup>47</sup> and 5,700,000 lived in the United States. Combined, these two countries represent 84% of world Jewry. Other countries rounding out the "top 10" are France (453,000), Canada (390,500), the United Kingdom (290,000), Argentina (180,300), Russia (172,000), Germany (116,000), Australia (113,400), and Brazil (93,200).

Most major cities in the developed world are inhabited by some Jewish people. But youthful Israeli backpackers, international Jewish businesspeople, and tourists may be found even in remote areas of our world.

### *Bringing Messiah back to His Own*

Christians believe in the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Our Bibles teach us that God's love for the Jewish people is everlasting. (Isaiah 49:15-16; Jeremiah 31:3). We understand that Jesus of Nazareth came in fulfillment of His promises to the nation of Israel (Romans 11:5). We have the example of both Jesus and Paul, who went first to the Jewish people with the message of salvation. The Scriptures teach us that among the Jewish people "at the present time there is a remnant according to God's gracious choice" (Rom. 11:5). And God continues to build the church as Jews and Gentiles are made "one new man" in Messiah.

We understand that if we have God's heart for His chosen people, we will desire their salvation. But how are Jewish people saved?

In Romans 2, 9, and 10, Paul argues that Jewish people are not regenerated by following their traditions. Like all sinners, Jewish people need to have Messiah's righteousness applied to their account. Peter tells a Jewish audience, "there is salvation in no one else; for there is no other name under heaven that has been given among men by which we must be saved" (Acts 4:12).

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<sup>47</sup> Israel's census at the close of 2019 shows a total population of 9,136,000 of which 6,772,000 are Jewish according to <https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/latest-population-statistics-for-israel>.

### *The “Jewish Gospel”*

Truly, the essence of the gospel is the same for Jews and Gentiles. But since most Jewish people don't know the New Testament is a Jewish book, or accept it as the Word of God, to present the good news of salvation to them it is good to begin from the *Tanakh*. Here are the main points, with suggested Scripture references.

- God is holy – and requires us to be holy.  
*“Speak to all the congregation of the people of Israel and say to them, You shall be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy.”* (Lev. 19:2)
- We are sinners who violate God's righteous standards.  
*Surely there is not a righteous man on earth who does good and never sins.* (Eccles. 7:20; also Psalm 53:3-4)
- Our holy God cannot allow sin into His presence. Our sins separate us from God.  
*You who are of purer eyes than to see evil and cannot look at wrong, why do you idly look at traitors and remain silent when the wicked swallows up the man more righteous than he?* (Habakkuk 1:13)  
*But your iniquities have made a separation between you and your God, and your sins have hidden his face from you so that he does not hear.* (Isa. 59:2)
- The penalty for sin is death — and eternal separation from God.  
*But everyone shall die for his own iniquity.* (Jer. 31:30a; Ezek. 18:20)
- Our “good deeds” cannot erase the stain of sin.  
*We have all become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous deeds are like a polluted garment.* (Isa. 64:6a)  
*Truly no man can ransom another, or give to God the price of his life, for the ransom of their life is costly and can never suffice.* (Psalm 49:7-8)
- God, in His grace, provides the solution to our death sentence.

*But God will ransom my soul from the power of Sheol, for he will receive me. (Psalm 49:15).*

- In the past, God set up a system of blood sacrifice. An innocent animal died as a substitute for a sinful person.

*For the life of the flesh is in the blood, and I have given it for you on the altar to make atonement for your souls, for it is the blood that makes atonement by the life. (Lev. 17:11; 10:17; 4:35)*

- But what about today, when we have no Temple or sacrifice? Isaiah 53<sup>48</sup> promises a Messiah who would be God's perfect sacrifice.

*All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned — every one — to his own way; and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all. (Isa. 53:6)*

*By oppression and judgment he was taken away; and as for his generation, who considered that he was cut off out of the land of the living, stricken for the transgression of my people? (Isa. 53:8)*

*Because he poured out his soul to death and was numbered with the transgressors; yet he bore the sin of many, and makes intercession for the transgressors. (Isa. 53:12)*

- The prophets of Israel gave us clues to identify the Messiah.
  - His ancestry was from the family of David (Jer. 23:5-6).
  - The city of His birth was Bethlehem (Mic. 5:1).
  - He had a supernatural nature (Isa. 9:5-6; Jer. 23:5-6).
  - The manner of His execution is described (Psalm 22:14-17).
  - He rose from the dead (Psalm 16:10; Isa. 53:10).
  - The time of His coming was before the destruction of Herod's Temple in 70 CE (Dan. 9:26).

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48 Isaiah 52:13 -53:12 has been called "The Gospel of Isaiah." It is the Old Testament's clearest portrayal of Messiah. This is the passage the Ethiopian eunuch was reading when Philip approached him in Acts 8. An effective use of the text is to say to a Jewish friend, "I'd like to read you something from the Bible and have you guess where it is found and who it is describing."

- Only one person has perfectly fulfilled these prophecies: Yeshua (Jesus of Nazareth). To examine the evidence, read the Gospel of Matthew.
- God has always required one thing of us — for us to be made righteous: personal faith.  
*And he [Abraham] believed the Lord, and he counted it to him as righteousness. (Gen. 15:6)*
- Just like Abraham, we must believe God. For us, that means trusting that Messiah Jesus died for my sins and was raised from death so I can be made right with God.  
*For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. (John 3:16)*  
*...If you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For with the heart one believes and is justified, and with the mouth one confesses and is saved. For the Scripture says, "Everyone who believes in him will not be put to shame." (Rom 10:9-11)*

### *Introducing Messiah to Jewish People*

"What's the best approach to the gospel with Jewish people?"

Great question! But it is a little like someone going into a pharmacy and saying, "My friend is sick. What should I give him?"

The pharmacy has plenty of medicines, but the pharmacist would need more information. "What are your friend's symptoms? Is he allergic to any medications? Can he take a pill or would a liquid be better?"

What is really needed is a prescription — and that requires a proper diagnosis. In the case of Jewish people, they suffer from the same disease as gentiles: sin. And the cure is the same for everyone: faith in Jesus' death, burial, and resurrection as our personal substitute. That much is simple.



The challenge is, how do we deliver the prescription? The key is to ask questions,<sup>49</sup> which will help us understand where each person is on their spiritual journey. It is very helpful to understand our audience before we address their need. For example, are they interested in spiritual matters or hostile toward religion? Are they committed to a religious system, totally atheistic, or accepting of any combination of views and practices? Are they sincerely seeking answers or just interested in debating?

Here are some “diagnostic questions” you may find helpful in conversations when you aren’t sure if the person to whom you are speaking is Jewish<sup>50</sup>:

- “If you had the opportunity to ask God one question, what would it be?”
- “I’m always interested to hear if people are basically following the religion in which they were raised or if they have changed their views since childhood. What has been your experience?”

If a person says, “I’m Jewish,” responses like the following may prove helpful in moving conversation forward:

- “That’s wonderful! The world has been blessed in many ways by the Jewish people. I’d be very interested to learn what being Jewish means to you. Does it have more to do with culture and tradition, or are you practicing Judaism in some form?”
- “When I meet someone who is Jewish, as a Christian I want to tell them two things. First, ‘I’m sorry for all the suffering of your people — especially at the hands of those who identify themselves as Christians.’ And second, ‘Thank you!’ God used the

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49 Randy Newman’s books, *Questioning Evangelism: Engaging People’s Hearts the Way Jesus Did* and *Engaging with Jewish People*, are highly recommended resources for further study. (See recommended reading list at end of chapter.)

50 Because of the “longest hatred” of anti-Semitism, many aren’t eager to identify themselves as Jews when speaking with strangers.

Jewish people to give us the Bible and the Messiah — two of the greatest blessings in my life.”

- “I’ve been seeing on the news that anti-Semitism is increasing in many places. As a Christian that makes me very sad. What is your view on why the Jewish people have suffered so much in history?”

Please understand — these are not magic questions that will always result in great spiritual discussions. They are examples of open-ended (rather than “yes or no”) questions. In every case you should ask questions that are of genuine interest to you and demonstrate kindness and concern to the individuals with whom you are speaking.

Let’s consider some specific cases.

A significant number of Jewish people define themselves as atheists, including a majority of those who were raised in the Soviet Union. “So, you are absolutely certain there can be no God?” is a good question to ask. If they are uncertain, they really are agnostics. Either way, here are some follow-up questions that can further the discussion:

- “Did you ever believe in God, or have you always questioned His existence?”
- “Can you tell me how you define God? I may not believe in that god either!”
- “What kind of evidence would you require before you might believe God exists?”

As you listen carefully to how a Jewish atheist responds, you may gain insight into the category in which they best fit.<sup>51</sup>

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51 Those who grew up under the influence of Hebraic thought where parables and

### *Intellectual Atheists*

Intellectual atheists typically have bought into secular humanism rooted in scientific materialism, which believes that macro-evolutionary theory can explain the origin of life. The “intelligent design” approach to science offers thoughtful reasons to question the established scientific viewpoint. Among the advocates for “ID” is James Tour,<sup>52</sup> a brilliant Jewish chemist who also is outspoken about his faith in Jesus. Intellectual objections should be met with reasoned answers. (1 Pet. 3:15.)

### *Emotional Atheists*

In every culture, people struggle with the concept of a loving all-powerful Creator who allows disease, accidents, natural disasters, and death. Like others, Jewish people mourn the deaths of loved ones: a still-born baby in the womb, a child who drowns, a mother stricken with cancer.

Emotional objections need to be addressed at the heart level with large amounts of compassion, kindness, and empathy. The Bible does provide answers to our “why God” questions. (One could express this broadly with a statement such as “Suffering and death are the consequence of our sin. There is hope beyond this broken world.”) But these are not easy answers, and they don’t stop the pain a person is feeling. Sometimes the best way to demonstrate to a hurting individual that God loves them is to be His ears to listen and His hands to offer comfort and help.

Added to the universal experience of personal pain and loss is the history of the Jewish people, which has long been marked by suffering. In Scripture we see Egypt’s Pharaoh ordering the death of Hebrew baby boys. In Persia, Haman convinces the king to issue a decree to kill all the Jews in his vast empire. Even in our day, peo-  
 .....  
 stories are examples and starting points to ask more questions and uncover secrets about life rather than a manual full of answers about life.

52 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=A0uq727Fjw>.

ple are attacked in, for example, Europe and the Americas simply because they are Jewish.

“Where was God when the six million<sup>53</sup> died in the Holocaust?” is a common way for Jewish people to express why they have given up on God. This objection must be handled sensitively. The extermination of two-thirds of European Jewry in World War II is a horrific tragedy that continues to impact the generations that followed. It represents one of Satan’s greatest attempts to wipe out the people to whom God made such great promises.

In truth, God was with the Jewish people during every era of suffering. He was with the Hebrews during their 400 years of enslavement in Egypt. He was with them when He led them out of bondage and brought them to the Land of Promise. He was with the Jewish exiles when Haman plotted their annihilation. Instead, Haman and his family were executed.

Even so, God was with the Jewish people in the Nazi concentration camps. There were followers of Jesus, both Jewish and Gentile,<sup>54</sup> who also were suffering in those death camps and sharing the message of hope in the Messiah. And out of the ashes of the Holocaust the world witnessed the rebirth of the modern State of Israel on May 14, 1948. For the first time in more than 2,000 years the Jewish people were living independently in the land God promised to Abraham in Genesis 15.<sup>55</sup>

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53 Of the six million Jewish people who perished, one million were children, adding to the sorrow. Only in recent years has the global Jewish population equaled the 17 million who were alive in 1939. See [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Historical\\_Jewish\\_population\\_comparisons](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Historical_Jewish_population_comparisons)

54 Corrie ten Boom’s *The Hiding Place* is one of the most famous stories of Christian witness in the death camps.

55 Two “easy answer” traps should be avoided. The first is blaming the victim.” Certainly sin is the root cause of all suffering in our world, and it’s true that Moses foretold that dispersion from the Promised Land would be a consequence of Israel’s disobedience — but “What were the Jews doing in Germany anyway?” is not a good approach to explaining the Holocaust. The second is that while it is true that Israel was “reborn” as a nation three years after World War II ended, that does not ease the grief of those who lost loved ones.

One additional special challenge needs to be considered. Tragically, some of the worst persecutions of Jews in the last 500 years occurred at the hands of people identifying as Christians.<sup>56</sup> Many Jewish people consider the Nazis to have been Christians — after all, Germany was the country of both the Enlightenment and the Reformation. So we should not be surprised that some Jewish people view Christians as enemies.

Considering this fact, we should be sensitive to the reality that even for nonreligious Jewish people, becoming a Christian is usually regarded as a betrayal of one's Jewish identity. Over the centuries both the Jewish and Christian communities have reinforced the position that a Jew who believes in Jesus is no longer Jewish.

But clearly there is a distinction between following the Jewish religion (Judaism) and "being Jewish" (ethnic identity). A Chinese person who believes in Jesus does not stop being Chinese, nor does any person give up their ethnicity when they come to faith. What could be more Jewish than believing in the Jewish Messiah? If Yeshua is not the Messiah God promised to Israel, He is no one's Messiah. But since He indeed did fulfill the messianic prophecies, as the King of Israel<sup>57</sup> He rightly deserves the devotion of the Jewish people.

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56 Michael Brown's *Our Hands are Stained with Blood* (see recommended reading list at end of chapter) is one of many books documenting persecution of Jewish communities in "Christian Europe": edicts of expulsion, blood libels (an accusation that Jewish people used the blood of Christians in religious rituals, especially in the preparation of Passover bread, that was perpetrated throughout the Middle Ages and (sporadically) until the early 20th century), the Crusades, the Inquisition, pogroms, and the Holocaust. Adolph Hitler stated, "I never said anything about the Jews that Martin Luther didn't say."

57 From the Magi's query "Where is he who is born king of the Jews?" to "Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews" nailed to the cross in three languages, Yeshua's right to the Throne of David is proclaimed.

### Theological Critics

Another category of objections<sup>58</sup> is theological. One major difference between rabbinic Judaism and historic Christianity is our view of God.

In response to the Christian doctrine of the Trinity,<sup>59</sup> the Jewish philosopher Maimonides in his 13 Principles of Jewish Faith stressed God's unity and that He has no body.<sup>60</sup> Any "easy explanation" of the nature of divinity, including analogies (like comparing the Trinity to an egg's egg yolk, white, and shell — or to water, ice, and steam — or to a grandfather, father, and son) are inadequate, if not inaccurate, depictions. It is far better to admit that the Eternal One is beyond our full comprehension. (Deut. 29:29; Isa. 40:13, 14, 18.) What we know of Him is through His revealed Word, and that is our reliable source.

One approach is to note that *elohim* is a plural form of *el*. When speaking of pagan idols, the translators write "gods."<sup>61</sup> But when referring to the Holy One of Israel, we translate *elohim* as "God."

Similarly, "Let us make man in our image" (Genesis 1:26) from the Creation account invites the question, "In whose image are we made?"

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58 In his comprehensive five-volume series *Answering Jewish Objections to Jesus*, Michael Brown deals with general, historical, theological, and traditional objections, as well as covering messianic prophecy and New Testament issues. (See recommended reading list at end of chapter.)

59 The belief in "one God in essence, manifested in three distinct persons: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit" is a formulation of classic Christian trinitarian doctrine. Judaism, Islam, and Unitarianism are among the religious systems that reject the Trinity. Christianity is considered a monotheistic religion by most, given our understanding that there is only one God.

60 Principle 2 states, "I believe by complete faith that the Creator, blessed be His name, is a Unity, and there is no union in any way like Him. He alone is our God, who was, who is, and who is to be." Principle 3 avers, "I believe by complete faith that the Creator, blessed be His name, is not a body, is not affected by physical matter, and nothing whatsoever can compare to Him."

61 E.g., Exodus 20:3 states, "You shall have no other gods (*elohim*) before me."

We can look at Genesis 18 where three “men” approach Abraham’s tent. God speaks to Abraham; two angels depart for Sodom. In Genesis 32:24 Jacob wrestles with a man; in verse 30 he states he has “seen God face to face.”

“The angel of the LORD” merits special study. For example:

- In Genesis 16:10-11, “the angel of the LORD” speaks to Hagar. In verse 13 Hagar indicates she “called the name of the LORD who spoke to her ‘the GOD who sees.’”
- In Exodus 3, the angel of the LORD appears in the flaming bush, but God does the speaking.

In Isaiah 48:16 we find these words:

*Come near to Me, listen to this:  
From the first I have not spoken in secret,  
From the time it took place, I was there.  
And now the Lord God has sent Me, and His Spirit.*

None of these passages state explicitly, “God is a Trinity.” And if they did, we’d still require further explanation! You may ask, “If this is such a difficult doctrine, should we not just avoid it?”

The New Testament doesn’t leave us that option. Yeshua (Jesus) says things like “I and My Father are one” and “If you have seen Me, you have seen the Father.” (John 10:30; John 14:9.) No one has the authority to forgive sins but God alone, yet Jesus forgave sins. (Mark 2:5-7.) We may not fully explain what we cannot fully understand, but we can plainly teach what Scripture records.

A commonly heard example of the “Jesus can’t be the Messiah because” category of Jewish objections to Jesus is this: “When Messiah comes, he will bring peace to our world. There is no peace, so Messiah hasn’t yet arrived.”

What Jewish hearts (and those of most gentiles as well!) long for is a kingdom of righteousness, justice, and peace. Isaiah 2 and 11 speak of “swords beaten into plowshares” and “the wolf dwelling with the lamb” in the Messianic Age to come.

Jesus made it clear that in His first coming He did not come to establish an earthly kingdom (John 18:36.) Rather, He came to seek and save the lost and give His life as a ransom for many (Matt. 18:11; 20:28.) Through His atoning sacrifice, our Prince of Peace made it possible for us to have peace with God (Rom. 5:1). The perfect life for which we were created, the “back to the Garden of Eden” paradise for which our hearts long, is what we’ll experience in the world that Jesus will create for His followers in the New Heaven and the New Earth (Isa. 65, Rev. 21, John 14:1-3.) So we already can experience “vertical peace” with our Holy Creator. The fullness of “horizontal peace” awaits us in the world to come, the new creation, as promised by the Messiah of Israel.

You may also encounter arguments put forth by professional “anti-missionaries.” Typical ones include “The New Testament is full of errors” and “The New Testament misquotes the *Tanakh*.” Much good work has been done preparing answers for the honest seeker.<sup>62</sup>

The skeptic may be willing to listen. The scoffer only wants to ridicule and discourage us from sharing our faith. “Don’t answer a fool according to his folly” and “Speak the truth in love” (Prov. 26:4; Eph. 4:15) are two solid pieces of advice to heed in witnessing situations.

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62 Michael Brown’s *Answering Jewish Objections* covers most objections you may hear. Life in Messiah’s evangelistic website ([www.InSearchOfShalom.com](http://www.InSearchOfShalom.com)) provides a scriptural defense of the gospel as well as video testimonies of Messianic Jews who believe in Yeshua. Many other resources can be found online, such as <https://www.jewsforjesus.org/answers>; <http://chosenpeopleanswers.com>, “under construction” as of this writing, will be a valuable resource when available.



### *Best Practices for Planting a “Messianic Congregation”<sup>63</sup>*

“Upon this rock I will build My church” (Matt. 16:18.) Yeshua’s declarative statement reminds us that we engage in His purposeful program when we evangelize and disciple. Each believer is an individual member of His body, the Church (Rom. 12:5; Col. 1:18.)

For those of us who are not physical descendants of Abraham, the wonderful news is that God’s eternal plan includes Gentiles! And though distinct from physical Israel, Gentiles who believe in Jesus, the Jewish Messiah, fully share in the spiritual riches God promised the world through Abraham (Rom, 4:16) in Genesis 12:3.

Moreover, there is not a “Jewish church” and a “Gentile church.” Regardless of our genetic makeup or spiritual heritage, we are “made one in Messiah” (Eph. 2:11-22; 3:6) when we place our trust in His finished work for our salvation. Nonetheless, we don’t lose our ethnic identity<sup>64</sup> (any more than we lose our gender or social standing) when we place our trust in the Jewish Messiah.

What practical considerations are there when believers from diverse backgrounds meet to form a local church? Specifically, what issues need to be prayerfully thought through when Jewish and Gentile believers form a congregation? Here are a few key elements to think through.

- *The essential purpose* of every church is to glorify God as the redeemed gather for worship, are built up in their faith through the preaching of His Word, and are mobilized to serve Him

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63 As an example of cultural sensitivity, most Messianic congregations do not use the word church in their name. This is because within the wider Jewish community, *church* is not only equated with Gentiles but, tragically, often has been identified historically with anti-Semitism. In Israel, an indigenous church is likely to self-identify as a *Kehilah Meshichit* (Messianic Assembly) rather than *Beit Knesset* (synagogue) or *Kenisiya* (church).

64 Galatians 3:28 states, “There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free man, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus.” This does not mean that our identities are erased — it means we are all equal at the foot of the cross.

through ministering to believers and reaching nonbelievers with the gospel.

- *The cultural context* in which a church is planted will influence the form it takes. As one example, “Sunday church” as we know it is a tradition that developed outside Israel. The biblical Sabbath begins at sunset on Friday and ends Saturday evening. In Israel, Sunday is the first day of the workweek and kids are in school. So within Israel, most indigenous Messianic congregations meet on Saturday.

There is no command in Scripture that believers must gather to worship on Sunday. In regard to observing special days (Sabbath/Sunday or festivals), the Apostle Paul instructed the first-century church in Rome, “One person regards one day above another, another regards every day alike. Each person must be fully convinced in his own mind. He who observes the day, observes it for the Lord.”

“Contextualizing” the gospel to reach people groups most effectively within their culture is a challenge requiring great wisdom and a gracious spirit. The church began in Jerusalem in a Jewish setting and struggled at first with “what to do with the Gentiles.”<sup>65</sup> Over the centuries the church expanded to the nations and developed many indigenous forms of worship and cultural practices. Regardless of where in the world a church may be planted, we may be enriched by recognizing the Jewish roots of our faith. One example is in seeing how “God’s appointed times” (the calendar He gave to Israel) point to Messiah. Although the New Testament church is not mandated to “keep the feasts,” we gain rich insight in seeing how “Messiah our Passover also has been sacrificed” (1 Cor. 5:7) and the correlation between Shavuot/Pentecost and “Firstfruits.”

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65 The first church council’s deliberations on what was required for Gentiles to be welcomed into the church is recorded in Acts 15.

- *Issues of identity* are closely related to cultural expressions<sup>66</sup> in the church. A local church should be a welcoming place for all who attend, regardless of their background. Congregations established in monocultural settings have fewer challenges in creating a comfortable setting. But even those seeking to establish a “homogeneous Jewish fellowship” to reach their Jewish community need to bear in mind the wide spectrum of opinions about what constitutes Jewish expressions of faith and practice.

Keeping kosher (observing dietary rules), observing the Sabbath, and circumcising baby boys on the eighth day are examples of laws God gave to Israel under the Old Covenant. These remain primary markers of Jewish identity to this day.

Some traditions were developed later by the rabbis and embedded themselves into the Jewish cultures of religious and non-religious Jews alike. These include holding *bar* or *bat mitzvahs*, lighting Sabbath candles, affixing *mezuzahs* to doorposts, and wearing *kippot* (yarmulkes) and prayer shawls. These observances are part of the customs of many observant Jews today, including some who identify as Messianic (Jesus-believing). Godly discernment is needed in considering where contextualization ends and syncretism begins.

- *Sound biblical theology that begins with a proper hermeneutic* is foundational to any church plant. What is the relationship of the New Covenant believer to the Old Covenant? Is a follower of Messiah Jesus still obligated to keep the Law given to Moses? These key questions must be considered. For example,

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66 The influences of culture are easily overlooked in monocultural settings because “that’s just the way we do things around here.” We may not recognize how much of how we “do church” is culturally patterned. For example, nowhere in the New Testament do we see Christmas observed, or even mentioned. In truth, we don’t know for certain the date of Jesus’ birth. Similarly, the English-speaking world has largely lost the connection between Easter (a term not found in Scripture) and Passover. (A form of *Pesach* – the Hebrew term for Passover – is preserved in many languages as *Pascha*.) Easter eggs and chocolate bunnies are examples of traditions not addressed in the Bible. Christians do well to emphasize the biblical message amidst the “holiday flurry” of cultural traditions.

Jewish believers, especially those from religiously observant backgrounds, may struggle with issues such as whether to fast on Yom Kippur (the Day of Atonement).

Whole books have been written on this subject.<sup>67</sup> A key to answering such questions is distinguishing between *biblical*, *un-biblical*, and *abiblical* (or *extra-biblical*). A biblical “must” is an obligation which followers of Messiah Jesus are obligated to carry out.<sup>68</sup> Unbiblical matters (such as worshipping idols) must be avoided. Abiblical issues are not addressed in Scripture,<sup>69</sup> so believers have the freedom to observe or not according to the dictates of conscience.

“Each person must be fully convinced in his own mind” is our Romans 14 guideline.<sup>70</sup> We do well to counsel others not to violate their own conscience. Our greatest motivation is to do all things “to the glory of God” under the control of the Holy Spirit (1 Cor. 10:31) as we carry out the “royal law of love” (Gal. 5:13-26.)

Thankfully, resources are available for church planters serving in a Jewish context. A good starting point is Sam Nadler’s *Developing Healthy Messianic Congregations*. Ariel Ministries offers a treasury of books and DVDs on key topics.<sup>71</sup>

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67 One highly recommended resource is *Reading Moses, Seeing Jesus: How the Torah Fulfills its Goal in Yeshua*, by Seth Postell, Eitan Bar, and Erez Soref. (See recommended reading list at end of chapter.) A Kindle version is available on Amazon.

68 Yeshua’s “Great Commission” in Matthew 28:19-20 includes these words: “Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit,<sup>20</sup> *teaching them to observe all that I commanded you*; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age.” (Italics added.)

69 For instance, the Bible gives no “order of service” instructions for worship. A Messianic congregation may pattern a service along the lines of Jewish liturgical practice, choose a contemporary Christian format, or combine some traditions of each.

70 Romans 14:5. The first-century church faced numerous “debatable issues.” In addition to Romans 14, the discussion of eating meat sacrificed to idols provides good insights. See Acts 21:25 and 1 Corinthians 10:14-33.

71 See <https://www.ariel.org/outlines.htm> for a list of available resources from Ariel Ministries

The Olive Tree Congregation<sup>72</sup> in the north suburbs of Chicago is a fine example of a local assembly which lovingly integrates Jewish and Gentile believers as equal members of the Body of Messiah. This should be the goal of every church that is building according to the “Ephesians 2 blueprint.” But especially when planting a congregation in an area where Jewish people live, prayerful consideration should be given to their specific needs and concerns.

## CONCLUSION

We have the opportunity to demonstrate the true love of Christ by seeking to be a blessing and help to them. And there is no greater way to show God’s love to the Jewish people than to share the life-saving message of their Messiah with them!

Brothers, my heart's desire and prayer to God for them [in context, the Jewish people] is that they may be saved. For I bear them witness that they have a zeal for God, but not according to knowledge. For, being ignorant of the righteousness of God, and seeking to establish their own, they did not submit to God's righteousness. For Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes. (Rom. 10:1-3).

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What qualifies a person as being “a Jew/Jewish”?
2. Where in Scripture would you find:
  - God’s call of Abram/ Abraham and promise of global blessing
  - God’s unconditional blood covenant with Abram/ Abraham
  - The “Shema”
  - The clearest reference to Israel as God’s chosen people
  - That the gospel “is to the Jew first and also to the Gentile”

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72 Olive Tree’s website is <https://www.olive-tree.org/>.

3. Why is Passover so significant in Jewish history?
4. What is Jesus' "original name" in Hebrew and what is its meaning?
5. Why is the *Torah b'al peh* (Oral Law) so significant in the development of rabbinic Judaism?
6. What are the three major branches of Judaism today?
7. In presenting the gospel from the *Tanakh*, what OT Bible references teach us that:
  - God is holy
  - Man is sinful
  - Blood sacrifice is required
  - Personal faith is necessary for righteousness to be credited
8. What chapter of the *Tanakh* gives us the clearest picture of the Messiah's atoning work?
9. List five OT prophecies about the promised Messiah which Jesus fulfilled.
10. Give three examples of "Jewish objections" to the gospel/Christianity. How would you answer each one?
11. What practical concerns need to be given consideration when planting a church where Jewish people are being reached with the gospel?

**PERSONAL NOTES**

*Please use this space for writing your own reflection or a prayer regarding the content of this chapter.*

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## RECOMMENDED READING

Brown, Michael. *Answering Jewish Objections to Jesus*, vol. 1. Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2000.

[This comprehensive work is published in five volumes. Vols. 1-4 are published by Baker; Vol. 5 by Purple Pomegranate Productions in 2009.]

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[A Messianic Jew's practical advice for culturally sensitive approaches to reaching his people.]

Scott, Bruce. *Gleaning for the Remnant*. Lansing, IL: Life in Messiah, 2014.

[Helpful guidebook for understanding Jewish people and reaching them for Messiah. Free electronic copy available upon request from office@lifeinmessiah.org.]

Telchin, Stan. *Betrayed*. Grand Rapids: Chosen Books, 1981.

[Personal testimony of the faith journey of a Jewish businessman whose daughter became a follower of Yeshua while in college.]



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[Focuses on the development of Palestinian-Israeli issues.]

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[A thorough biblical analysis of God's enduring purposes for the Jewish nation.]

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[A classic text from a secular historian.]

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[A helpful approach to sharing our faith using questions as a stimulus to conversation.]

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[As advertised!]

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[A Jewish believer in Jesus gives an academic defense of using the Tanakh to point to Yeshua.]

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[Wonderfully rich and extensive treatment of the prophetic Scriptures, including examination of specific passages.]

Snyder, Avi. *Jews Don't Need Jesus and Other Misconceptions: Reflections of a Jewish Believer*.

[Deals with the common barriers that keep Evangelicals from sharing our faith with our Jewish friends.]

Vlach, Michael. *Has the Church Replaced Israel?* Nashville: B&H Publishing, 2010.

[Thorough review of the historic Christian views on the Church in relationship to the Jewish people.]

Wiesel, Elie. *Night*. Translated by Marion Wiesel. New York: Hill and Wang, 2006.

[Impactful first-person account of a young Jewish man who lost his family and faith in the Holocaust.]



# Church Planting in the Context of Buddhism

*Linda Gross and Bob Craft*

## PART ONE

*Linda Gross*

Buddhism began in about 500 B.C. in India. It was a reformation movement in Hinduism and came about as a result of people being disillusioned by certain Hindu beliefs. As people turned away from Hinduism, they began embracing new beliefs. Many Hindu sects arose. The most successful one was Buddhism.<sup>1</sup>

While Hinduism does not point to a specific founder, Buddhism does. He was Siddhartha Gautama of India. Gautama was born in 560 B.C. in Lumbini (modern-day Nepal). He was the son of a feudal lord, or ruler, or rajah in the upper caste. At his birth a prophecy was given that if Siddhartha stayed at home he would be a king, and if he left home he would be a savior of mankind. His father, Suddhodana, wanted Siddhartha to be a king. So, he kept the boy at

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1 Josh McDowell and Don Stewart, *Understanding Non-Christian Religions* (1982), p. 47; Kenneth Boa, Kenneth, *Cults, World Religions and You* (1981), p. 25. Also note that the priesthood is more important in Hinduism than in Buddhism. Buddhism has much less reliance on pandits (priests or religious scholars) for salvation or salvation teachings.

the palace, lavished him with the finest things materially, and kept him from all negative influence and suffering. Between the age of sixteen and nineteen, Siddhartha married a princess named Yasodharma. They had a son named Rahula.<sup>2</sup>

At the age of twenty-nine, Siddhartha wanted to see the world outside his palatial environment. He had known nothing else since birth. He received his father's permission to go. His father ordered that all the streets be decorated and cleared of all signs of suffering. However, some evidence of suffering remained. On his excursion, Siddhartha saw what Buddhists call *the Four Passing Sights*. They were a sick old man, a decrepit old man, a corpse on the way to cremation in a funeral procession, and a peaceful-looking monk begging for food.<sup>3</sup>

Siddhartha asked about each one. He was told that all people are liable to become sick and suffer, and everyone will eventually become decrepit. He was also told that everyone will eventually die.<sup>4</sup>

As Siddhartha considered the peaceful face of the monk, he decided this was the preferred lifestyle. He immediately left his family and palace behind to become a beggar and to search for enlightenment. This departure became known as *the Great Renunciation*.<sup>5</sup>

But as the king-to-be searched Hindu scriptures, he found no satisfaction for his hungry soul. In time he came to regard asceticism as a futile pursuit. So, he finally chose what Buddhists call *the Middle Path*. It was in this frame of mind that he began to practice deep meditation.<sup>6</sup>

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2 McDowell and Stewart, *Understanding Non-Christian Religions*, p. 47-49; Boa, *Cults, World Religions and You*, p. 25-27; Ridenour, Fritz, *So What's the Difference?* (1967), pp. 83-84.

3 *Ibid.*

4 *Ibid.*

5 McDowell and Stewart, *Understanding Non-Christian Religions*, p. 49.

6 McDowell and Stewart, *Understanding Non-Christian Religions*, p. 47-49; Boa, p. 25-27; Ridenour, *So What's the Difference?*, pp. 83-84.

At this point Siddhartha went to sit under a fig tree for forty days and forty nights. During this time he reached *Nirvana* — a state of enlightenment, or the highest degree of God-consciousness. The tree under which he sat came to be called the *Bodhi Tree*. (Two other names that are also used for this tree are *Bo Tree* or *Tree of Wisdom*.) From that time on (about 525 B.C.), Siddhartha became the *Buddha* — “the Enlightened One.” He began teaching his new-found truths.<sup>7</sup>

Buddhism spread to other countries. Today there are hundreds of sects and sub-sects. In addition, conservative and liberal branches arose.

## BASIC CONCEPTS, PRECEPTS, LAW, PRINCIPLES, AND SYMBOLS

Like any world religion, Buddhism has particular teachings and beliefs that its adherents attempt to understand and practice. In this chapter we will attempt to describe them without causing “information overload.” Because of its complexities, Buddhism is a difficult religion to fully understand, which makes it doubly difficult for the church planter who wants to bring Christ into the picture.

### *Basic Concepts*

Some basic concepts identify a person as a follower of Buddhism. The terms below may be familiar, but they are often misunderstood — so they bear repeating as we seek to understand this religion.

### *Karma*<sup>8</sup>

The Buddhist definition of *Karma* is that it is the wholesome and unwholesome volitions and simultaneous mental factors giving rise to respective actions in body, speech, and mind. These cause rebirth

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<sup>7</sup> McDowell and Stewart, *Understanding Non-Christian Religions*, p. 47-49; Boa, p. 25-27; Ridenour, *So What's the Difference?*, pp. 83-84.

<sup>8</sup> Nyanatiloka, *Buddhist Dictionary: A Manual of Buddhist Terms and Doctrines* (1972), p. 77.

and shape destiny. This means willful actions prompted by mental factors cause actions in mind, body, and speech which will affect rebirth and the condition of the “person” in that rebirth plus the future reincarnations. The Western definition of karma is that it is a law of natural causation to which the universe is subject. “The merits and demerits influenced by how Dharma is practiced in various situations throughout one’s life... determine his [the Buddhist’s] condition in the present one.”<sup>9</sup>

### *Rebirth/Reincarnation*<sup>10</sup>

The purpose of rebirth or reincarnation is the purging of sins. *Cyclic rebirth* in the form of *reincarnation* pays back the sins of the past. In addition, it tries to provide an answer for suffering.

### *Enlightenment*<sup>11</sup>

*Enlightenment* is *Bodhi* or wisdom in which there is supreme knowledge. There is an awakening from the stupor of the mind caused by defilement. The awakening is for the purpose of comprehending what are called *the Four Noble Truths*, which will be described further below.

### *Precepts*<sup>12</sup>

In addition to basic concepts, Buddhism also holds to five basic precepts. Every Buddhist is responsible for adhering to them.

1. Do not kill.
2. Do not steal.
3. Do not lie.
4. Do not become drunk.
5. Do not commit adultery

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9 McDowell and Stewart, *Understanding Non-Christian Religions*, p. 59.

10 Walter Martin, *The Riddle of Reincarnation* (1977), pp. 23-24.

11 Nyanatiloka, *Buddhist Dictionary*, p. 34.

12 McDowell and Stewart, *Understanding Non-Christian Religions*, p. 57.

The junior priest, at twenty-one years of age, learns five more precepts<sup>13</sup> and is responsible for adhering to them. They are:

6. Eat moderately and only at appointed times.
7. Avoid that which excites the senses.
8. Do not wear adornments (including perfumes).
9. Do not sleep in luxurious beds.
10. Accept no silver or gold. (Live ascetically.)

A senior priest must learn a total of 8400 Buddhist laws. This strenuous adherence may stretch over numerous rebirths.

### Law

Generally, the one basic law of Buddha is “do good and receive good; do bad and receive bad.”<sup>14</sup> You are, therefore, your own savior.

### Principles

In addition to concepts, precepts, and law, Buddhists adhere to three overarching principles. They are named the *Three Refuges*, *Four Noble Truths*, and *Eightfold Path*. Here are brief descriptions.

#### *Three Refuges*<sup>15</sup> (*Triple Gems*)

Believing in the Three Refuges or Triple Gems is a minimum requirement for the layman Buddhist. They are:

- The Buddha
- The Teaching
- The order (the Monkhood / Nunhood).

In other words, a practicing adherent believes in the Buddha, in his teaching, and in the priesthood of those who seek to go beyond being a mere practitioner of the faith.

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13 McDowell and Stewart, *Understanding Non-Christian Religions*, p. 57.

14 Sam Siam of Sam Siam Ministries, Modesto, CA.

15 W. F. Jayasuriya, *The Psychology and Philosophy of Buddhism* (1976), p. XXXVI.



### *Four Noble Truths*<sup>16</sup>

Buddhists also follow four basic truths regarding suffering.

1. Suffering is universal. Everyone suffers.
2. The cause of suffering is cravings — selfish desires to satisfy the senses.
3. The cure for the cravings is the elimination or extinguishing of the craving.
4. The way to eliminate the cravings is to follow the Eightfold Path.

### *Eightfold Path*<sup>17</sup>

The Eightfold Path requires an attitude or posture on the part of the practicing Buddhist. One must have:

1. Right views (accept the Four Noble Truths and the Eightfold Path).
2. Right resolve (renounce all pleasures, living in asceticism).
3. Right speech (refraining from lying, divisive speech, abusive speech, idle chatter).
4. Right behavior (abstaining from killing, stealing, and sexual misconduct).
5. Right occupation (abstaining from occupations that are not considered good, such as trading in meat, weapons, or alcohol).
6. Right effort (preventing unwholesome states of mind and generating wholesome states of mind).
7. Right contemplation (never being absent-minded, being conscious of what one is doing. (Originally, right contemplation meant being mindful of the teachings).
8. Right meditation — practice four levels of meditation).

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<sup>16</sup> McDowell and Stewart, *Understanding Non-Christian Religions*, p. 51.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid*, p. 52

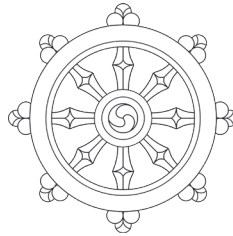
## Symbols

Two symbols are commonly used in the practice of Buddhism.

1. The Buddha standing with his arm raised, or seated in a lotus position or reclining.



2. The eight-spoked wheel, which represents the Eightfold Path. It is most often seen around Buddhist temples, and is seen more and more frequently.



## Branches of Buddhism

While there is a wide variety of forms of Buddhism, there are essentially two main branches: *Theravada*, also known as *Hinayana* (the teaching of the Lesser Way), and *Mahayana* (the teaching of the Greater Way).

Theravada is usually reported only as Theravada or Hinayana. This branch of Buddhism is dominant in Thailand, Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, and Sri Lanka.

Mahayana Buddhism prevails in Vietnam, China, Tibet, Japan, and Korea.<sup>18</sup> You may already be familiar with the names of some of the Mahayana sects: Pure Land Buddhism, Zen Buddhism, Nichiren Shoshu Buddhism, and Tibetan Buddhism (also called Lamaism).<sup>19</sup>

Although Lamaism is a Mahayana sect, it appears to be emerging as a distinct branch from Tibet. However, for the purpose of this article we will discuss it as a sect.

Here are brief descriptions of the three branches. The numbered items correspond, so you can compare how specific aspects differ from sect to sect.<sup>20</sup>

## Theravada (Hinayana) Buddhism

*(Expressed as The Lesser Way, or the lesser vehicle and “few there be that find it.”)*

According to Theravada teachings, all people have the responsibility to find enlightenment for themselves, and meditation accomplishes that process by purifying the mind. Theravada is often considered the oldest form of Buddhism. It is important for church planters in a Theravada Buddhist context to be aware of the following characteristics:

1. *It is closer to the original* Buddhist teaching than other expressions of Buddhism.
2. *It holds to Gautama’s teachings and the Pāli Canon* — the standard collection of scriptures in the Theravada Buddhist tradition, as preserved in the Pāli language. It is the most complete extant early Buddhist canon.

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18 Ridenour, *So What’s the Difference?*, p 87.

19 McDowell and Stewart, *Understanding Non-Christian Religions*, p. 53; Boa, *Cults, World Religion and You*, pp. 29-30.

20 McDowell and Stewart, *Understanding Non-Christian Religions*, p. 55; Boa, *Cults, World Religion and You*, pp. 27-29; Henry J. Heydt, *A Comparison of World Religions* (1967), pp. 61-63; and Mark Buntain of Calcutta Mercy, Calcutta, India.

3. *The key virtue is Bodhi* (enlightenment).<sup>21</sup> One can think of Bodhi as insight and wisdom and enlightenment.
4. *Salvation* is achieved by one's own effort, without the help of God — a humanistic worldview. The concept of Karma (law of cause and effect) is iron-clad and precludes any possibility of forgiveness.<sup>22</sup>
5. *Theravada Buddhism calls followers to renounce pleasure and live a monastic life*, so is called the "path of the few" (or the "Lesser Vehicle" or "Lesser Way"). Only a few achieve Nirvana, or release from rebirths.
6. *The ideal* is to become a saint or Perfected Disciple (*Arhat*). Buddha is *Arha*, having attained Perfect Holiness (*Arhatta*). This ideal makes clear the value of monkhood.
7. *Future life* consists of repeated reincarnations. Buddhists' hope is that after a series of reincarnations, they will arrive at Nirvana — a state of impersonality, the highest degree of meditation, absolute bliss, of non-existence of the person, a release from suffering, desire, and the finite self.<sup>23</sup> However, as was mentioned earlier, Theravada Buddhists do not expect that many people will achieve Nirvana.
8. *Existence (Signata)* has three main characteristics: impermanence (*Anicca*), suffering or misery (*Dukkha; Suca, Dukkhatta*), and non-self (*Anata*).<sup>24</sup>
9. *The central doctrine* is a concept of "non-self," "non-soul," "non-ego," and "impersonality." No thing or person exists permanent-

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21 Nyanatiloka, *Buddhist Dictionary*, p. 34.

22 *Ibid.* p. 77.

23 No soul; no more state of internal negatives or conflicts, no memory of negatives in past lives, no memory of past lives. This differs from Hinduism in which the universal self after death either transmigrates to a new life or is released (moksha) from the chains of existence.

24 Nyanatiloka, *Buddhist Dictionary*, pp. 12-14, 54-55.

ly in, of, or by itself. Present existence is transitory, and bound together with other previous and future existences.<sup>25</sup>

10. *Theravada Buddhism is atheistic.* There is no need for a deity in this inward-focused branch of Buddhism.
11. *Sacred literature consists of three groups of writings called Tripitaka* (“Three Baskets”) — the original Buddhist Scriptures written in the Pāli language. They are the *Vinaya Pitaka* (“the discipline basket), the *Sutta Pitaka* (“the teaching basket”), and the *Abhi-dhamma* (“the metaphysical basket”).
12. *Buddha* is regarded as a teacher.
13. *Jesus Christ* is regarded as a good teacher, but a less important one than Buddha.

## MAHAYANA BUDDHISM

*(The greater way and “many there be that find it.”)*

Mahayana Buddhism uses teachings which are more recent than the Pāli Canon. The emphasis is not so much on personal liberation (enlightenment) but on compassion, in a desire for all to reach enlightenment.

1. It is considered *liberal*.
2. It *emphasizes Buddha’s life*.
3. *The key virtues* are feelings and compassion (*karuna*)<sup>26</sup>. The belief in the existence of the power of Nirvana in every man makes it possible to achieve enlightenment and peace.

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<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.* pp. 12-13.

<sup>26</sup> Nyanatiloka, *Buddhist Dictionary*, p. 80.

4. *Salvation is dependent on the grace of others*, by faith in Gautama and many Bodhisattvas<sup>27</sup>, and by repeating the names of these over and over. The concept of Karma and the lack of possibility of forgiveness are the same as in Theravada.
5. It does **not** call for renunciation of pleasure nor for living the monastic life, so it is called the “path of many” (or the “Greater Vehicle” or the “Greater Way”).
6. *The ideal is to become like Buddha* — Buddhahood! Buddha is a savior or Bodhisattva. A Bodhisattva is One who comes to the verge of Nirvana but renounces it in order to become a helper or savior of mankind. This fosters emphasis on lay Buddhists’ involvement, as opposed to Theravada Buddhism’s emphasis on the attainment of monkhood.
7. *The understanding of future life* is the same as in Theravada.
8. *Existence* also is understood in the same terms as in Theravada.
9. *The central doctrine* is the same, too.
10. *Mahayana Buddhism is atheistic*.
11. *Sacred literature* includes Theravada’s Tripitaka, plus the Sutras. The Sutras are: “1) Lotus Sutra — a sermon by the Buddha on Bodhisattva, buddha-nature, etc. 2) Perfection of Wisdom Sutra (Prajna-paramita) — describes emptiness and others. 3) Heart Sutra— describes nirvana, emptiness, and Ultimate Reality. 4) “Land of Bliss” Sutra describes the Pure Land of Amitabha Buddha.”<sup>28</sup>
12. *Buddha* is regarded as a teacher.

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<sup>27</sup> This is in Mahayana Buddhism and means a person who is able to reach nirvana but delays doing so out of compassion in order to save suffering beings.

<sup>28</sup> Heydt, *A Comparison of World Religions*, p. 77; Ridenour, *So What’s the Difference?*, p. 76.

13. *Jesus Christ* is regarded as a good teacher, less important than Buddha.

## TIBETAN BUDDHISM OR LAMAISM

This branch of Buddhism is a combination of Mahayana, Vajrayana of Theravada, and the Tibetan Bon religion. In addition to sacred texts mentioned above, “The Book of the Dead” is Tibetan Buddhist sacred literature.

Tibetan Buddhism has become very popular in many nations — for example, in the United States since the 1960s, when the Dalai Lama visited. Forced to leave Tibet, now a refugee in India, the Dalai has promulgated his branch of Buddhism to younger generations of people, among them disillusioned Christians or former agnostics and atheists. Lamaism has been represented popularly by Tibetan *mandalas* (sand paintings, which have a deeper religious significance than just being a pretty design<sup>29</sup>.)



29 A Google search will reveal any number of definitions and descriptions of *mandalas* and their religious significance. *Mandalas* are not to be taken lightly because of the religious significance that they have.

## CONTRASTS BETWEEN BUDDHISM AND CHRISTIANITY

It goes without saying that there are major differences between Buddhism and Christianity. We will present some of them below in simple terms. Every church planter among Buddhists needs to be aware of these differences and, at least in his or her own mind, understand the biblical texts that demonstrate the differences.

### *Creation*

According to the Buddhist doctrine of dependent origination (*Paticcasamupada*),<sup>30</sup> no beings or phenomena exist independently. Nothing is permanent. Everything has a cause. There is no “self” in the sense of a permanent, integral, autonomous being with an individual existence. What we think of as our self — the “me” that inhabits our body — is just an ephemeral experience.

Contrast this with Genesis 1 and 2. “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth” and everything in and on the earth. God is the first cause.

### *God*

Buddhism denies the existence of a personal God.<sup>31</sup> Some Buddhists deify Buddha while simultaneously worshipping other gods, usually through idolatry.

Christianity is monotheistic. It teaches the existence of a personal God who is Triune (Father, Son, Holy Spirit; all three Persons are co-existent and co-eternal). This Triune God is the only object of worship.

*See Deuteronomy 6:4; Isaiah 43:10; 44:6; Matthew 4:10.*

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30 Bong Rin Ro and Ruth Ashenaur, eds., *The Bible and Theology in Asian Contexts* (1984), p. 304.

31 Heydt, *A Comparison of World Religions*, p. 75; Ridenour, *So What's the Difference?*, p. 91.



## Sin

Buddhism has no concept of sin against a supreme being. Sin is equated with individual desires and passions, thoughts of oneself, and breaking the five precepts (and, for priests / monks, breaking the additional five precepts).<sup>32</sup> The human dilemma is understood as the result of suffering, not the result of sin as defined in the Bible.<sup>33</sup> Anything that obstructs a human being's progress is sin. Each person is responsible for his or her own sin.<sup>34</sup>

Christianity understands all sin as ultimately against God, although it can also affect man and his world. Sin is rebellion and transgression against God and His law, falling short of God's ideal; it is unrighteousness, lack of faith in God, knowing good and not doing it. Acts of sin are the result of the sinful nature resident in all human beings since the fall of Adam.<sup>35</sup> Each person is born spiritually dead in sin.

*See Romans 3:23; James 4:17.*

## Suffering

Some Buddhists believe that the very fact of existence brings suffering. Yet it is also believed that the cause of suffering is the desire for pleasure, and that one can escape from suffering by eliminating the desire for pleasure. One can eliminate that desire by disciplining one's mind, living correctly by following the Eightfold Path. Buddhism identifies three types of suffering: ordinary suffering (*dukkha-dukkha*), suffering due to change (*Viparin-ama-dukkha*), and run-of-the-mill suffering such as illness, death, loss of a loved one (*samkajara-dukkha*).<sup>36</sup> Other than that, there is no real reason given for suffering.<sup>37</sup>

32 Heydt, *A Comparison of World Religions*, p. 77; Ridenour, *So What's the Difference?*, p. 91.

33 Ro and Ashenaur, *The Bible and Theology in Asian Contexts*, p. 304.

34 Heydt, *A Comparison of World Religions*, p. 76.

35 Ridenour, *So What's the Difference?*, p. 92.

36 Ro and Ashenaur, *The Bible and Theology in Asian Contexts*, p. 304.

37 Ridenour, *So What's the Difference?*, p. 92.

Christianity teaches that human suffering comes from sin. To eliminate suffering it is necessary to be rid of sin. But human beings are unable to perfect their control over their own desires; the heart of man is deceitful beyond cure. Suffering comes from yielding to evil and from a broken world that is alienated from God. Man is a slave to his selfish desires. Christ came into the world as God and as man to provide strength to overcome desires. Christ came to forgive, redeem, and restore. To end desire without God, one must die. With God in Christ, a person becomes a new person who dies — figuratively — to selfish desires.<sup>38</sup>

*See Romans 6:23; 8:18-23.*

### *Reincarnation*

A basic tenet of Buddhism is reincarnation — cyclic rebirth based on the law of Karma. Reincarnation occurs in order to help the individual to pay for past sins. However, a “reincarnated” person does not remember his past life (or lives) or his past sins, and so he cannot improve in the present life.<sup>39</sup> Reincarnation offers the false hope of second chance.

The Christian answer to sin is found in the person of Jesus Christ (Hebrews 1:1-3). He purged or cleansed us of our sins by His blood sacrifice as our High Priest (Hebrews 9:11-12; 7:24). He paid the price. Christianity differs from Buddhism in its approach to how sin can be purged; it teaches that there is no remission of sin without the shedding of blood. Therefore, there is no need to pay for our own sins in the way that the Buddhist law of Karma requires (John 9:1-3). It is only through the shed blood of Jesus.

Christianity also differs markedly from Buddhism in what it teaches about death. Buddhists foresee a myriad of reincarnations in an attempt to pay for sins, but Christians know from Scripture

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38 Ridenour, *So What's the Difference?*, p. 89.

39 Walter Martin, *The Riddle of Reincarnation* (1977), pp. 26-27.

that “It is appointed unto men once to die, but after this the judgement” (Hebrews 9:27 KJV). All will go from this life into the presence of God for judgement (Ecclesiastes 12:7), not to be reincarnated with the hope of purging past sins. For the believer, “to live is Christ and to die is gain” (Philippians 1:21). “We are confident, I say, and would prefer to be away from the body and at home with the Lord” (2 Corinthians 5:8).

The source of information about so-called true cases of reincarnation is none other than Satan.<sup>40</sup> Satan is the father of lies (John 8:44); he is the master deceiver. Reincarnation denies the resurrection, which is the Christian’s hope (1 Corinthians 15:17ff). The Christian hope is to be resurrected in the image of Christ — not to be reincarnated.

### *Salvation*

Buddhism teaches that salvation is accomplished by a human’s own effort to follow the Eightfold Path — to suppress all desires, both good and evil thoughts.<sup>41</sup> When a person has risen above these through repeated reincarnations, he or she is released from Karma and enters Nirvana, the negative state of passionless peace.<sup>42</sup>

Christianity declares that man is justified through faith in Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ is our all-sufficient sacrifice for sin. Jesus Christ is the only way to salvation, not an Eightfold Path or any other human effort. Attempting salvation by one’s own effort and repeated reincarnations has a “dead end.”

*See John 3:16; John 3:5; 2 Corinthians 5:17; Galatians 2:20; Ephesians 2:8-9; Titus 3:3-8.*

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40 Walter Martin, *The Riddle of Reincarnation* (1977), p. 36.

41 Ridenour, *So What’s the Difference?*, p. 92.

42 *Ibid*, p. 89.

## Jesus Christ

As was mentioned above, Buddhism considers Jesus Christ to have been a good teacher but less important than Buddha.<sup>43</sup>

Christianity asserts that Jesus Christ is the second Person of the Trinity, the Son of God (Himself God) who died for the sins of mankind.

*See Matthew 14:33; 16:16; John 1:34; 9:35-38; Romans 5:6-8; 1 Corinthians 15:3.*

## Man

Buddhism teaches that man is worthless, and has only a temporary existence related to impermanence, suffering, and non-self.<sup>44</sup> Once released from rebirths, he becomes a non-entity — one with the universe, fully enlightened.

Christianity teaches that every human being has infinite worth as he or she is made in God's image, and created to love God and enjoy Him forever. *See Genesis 1:26.*

Likewise, John 3:16 demonstrates that God loves his creation, man. *See Romans 5:8.*

## Future Life

The Buddhist looks forward to Nirvana after repeated reincarnations.<sup>45</sup> The goal is blissful nothingness.

The desire of all Christians is to find eternal life, the gift of God for all who receive and believe on Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. The future hope for believers is to reign with Christ in the New Heaven

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43 Heydt, *A Comparison of World Religions*, p. 80.

44 Lester Sumrall, *Where Was God When Pagan Religions Began?*, p. 98.

45 Ridenour, *So What's the Difference?*, p. 91.

and the New Earth where all things will be fully restored (Isaiah 65; Revelation 21). Those who reject God's gift, eternal punishment, condemnation, and hell awaits them.

*See John 10:28; Romans 5:21; 6:22-23; Ephesians 1:13-14; Galatians 6:8.*

Outside of Christ there is no forgiveness of sins, no salvation, no eternal life. *See 1 Timothy 2:5 and John 20:31.*

## BEST PRACTICES FOR CHURCH PLANTING IN A BUDDHIST CONTEXT

Alex Kocman points out in his article "4 Keys to Sharing the Gospel with Buddhists,"

"Communicating the gospel within an Eastern context is particularly challenging. Few, if any, biblical teachings translate easily into the dharmic religious context — a world of religions based on the cyclical nature of history, impersonal forces as the highest reality, and the goal of achieving nonexistence after death. Religions like Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, and Shintoism continually confound Western missionaries."<sup>46</sup>

In this section we will look at two major themes: how to effectively communicate the gospel to Buddhists, and how to pray for their conversion. We will then lay out Kocman's approach by looking specifically at suffering through the eyes of Solomon and his "noble truths."<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> Josh McDowell and Don Stewart, *Understanding Non-Christian Religions* (1982), p. 71.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid*, p. 49.

## HOW TO EFFECTIVELY COMMUNICATE THE GOSPEL

### *Establish Relationships*

Witnessing to followers of Buddha is most effective when a relationship has been established with the individual, family, or group. This will lead to trust, thereby permitting a freedom for the Buddhist to ask you about life and spiritual issues. This relationship also creates an openness for this person to listen to what you have to say. He is predisposed to listen since you and he have developed a relationship of trust and safety.

### *Understand People's Worldview and Doctrine*

Western minds think in linear terms (logical, systematic). Eastern minds think in cyclical terms. This means a systematic presentation of Christian doctrine will rarely lead to an open heart. Such a presentation will usually lead to more intellectual exercises — which may be lively, but will probably be unproductive.

Western Christians need to know and understand the basic doctrinal differences between Buddhism and Christianity. With this understanding, Western Christians can learn to present their message couched in illustrations and life experiences. People of the East learn from practical teaching.

Determine the individual's view of God and salvation. This demonstrates your sincere interest in him or her and helps you know how to share and pray for the person. When we ask a person about their own religion, they are usually open to sharing their beliefs in an attempt to “win us over” to their faith. At the same time, they are usually willing to practice reciprocity and listen to you present your own faith walk.

### *Anticipate Objections and Approach Conversations Accordingly*

Understand that in Buddhism the great evil is suffering, which is understood to be caused by desire. When desire is removed, then suffering is removed. This does not explain the existence of suffering in the world. Help your Buddhist friend to understand that the cure for suffering is the same as the cure for sin. That cure came with the suffering of Christ, who is the all-sufficient sacrifice for our sin. Romans 3:21-24 speaks of Jesus as a sacrifice of atonement, a propitiation for our sins. It is not something we could do. It was an external act by someone *in our stead*, unlike the teachings of Buddha. Christians still suffer, but have hope because they are “in Christ” and have the promise of full restoration. Sometimes Christians suffer because they follow Christ, but they await the completion of the new creation.

The follower of Buddha believes the only way to be delivered from desire and Karma is to follow the Eightfold Path. How will you bring to the follower of Buddha the truth about sin and the need for someone else to suffer for you for the remission of your sin? Followers of Buddha find this to be a very objectionable concept. They will not be able to save face, earn merit, or have their pride stroked if someone else does it for them. Nevertheless, Scripture shows there is only one way. Jesus himself said, “I am the way, the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me” (John 14:6). There are no eight steps or practices.

Followers of Buddha believe that through reincarnation they will have unending chances to get it right eventually, so they can finally arrive at Nirvana, released from Karma. We need to show them that “And as it is appointed unto men once to die, but after this the judgment” (Hebrews 9:27 KJV).

### *Ask Questions*

Ask questions of your Buddhist friend or contact to engage them in fruitful conversation. Kocman suggests these:

- Where do you think suffering comes from?
- Is it realistically possible to rid yourself of all desire? Aren't some desires — altruistic ones, for instance — inherently good?
- How do you feel about the idea of attaining nonexistence? Would eternal enjoyment of an all-sufficient God be better?
- If there were a God, what sort of God do you think He would have to be in order to willingly choose to suffer alongside us?
- When, at the end of the day, you fail to adequately quench your desires and you inevitably behave unwisely, what happens then? How do you address your own guilt?
- What makes you so sure that, given enough lifetimes, you'll eventually get it right?
- What if someone could somehow transfer all their positive Karma to your account, as a pure and unrestrained act of love? How would you respond?

### **HOW TO EFFECTIVELY PRAY TO REACH FOLLOWERS OF BUDDHISM**

Recognize you are entering an arena of spiritual warfare (Ephesians 6:10-18). Most forms of Buddhism embrace idolatry and ancestor worship. This is nothing more than demon worship.

The fire of God's Spirit is the only thing that will overcome the fires of hell. People given to idolatry and spirit worship are bound by various forms of black magic, witchcraft, spiritism, fear, resentment, jealousy, uncleanness, demonic possession, deep depression, and mental torment. These people are unable to fight the battle for themselves. They do not have the spiritual wherewithal to appropriate the power of Christ on their own prior to receiving Him as Lord and Savior, and even soon after coming to Christ.



An idolater needs to see that idolatry represents rebellion against God.<sup>48</sup>

Ask God to teach you how to pray (1 Corinthians 10:4-5; Acts 1:8). Desire to come into contact with God (Jeremiah 29:13; Joel 2:12). Prepare for seasons of fasting and prayer (Isaiah 58).

Praise and worship God (Psalm 149:6-9; 2 Chronicles 20). As we worship and enlist the Word of God, we overcome the dominion of darkness which holds nations (people groups) in its oppressive grip. Praise and worship will bind Satan and the forces of hell.

Pray for ...

- The spiritual eyes of the Buddhist to be opened to God's truth (1 Corinthians 2:10).
- The follower of Buddha to hunger for Creator God and to know Him and see Him as a Person and Creator.
- The follower of Buddha to see himself *with "self"* — as possessing personhood, as existing, as created in God's image (Genesis 1:26) — not as a non-existent personality.
- New converts from Buddhism to Christianity who have been disowned by their families will enter a socio-emotional vacuum that will make it difficult for him or her to stand in the Lord, especially in the beginning, so care and prayer over that one is essential.
- Workers called to reach Buddhists.
- Workers to understand that while Western minds think in the linear dimension (systematic, logical) Eastern minds think in the abstract (illustrations used around the point to bring you to discover the point).
- Workers to teach practical points of the gospel first, then teach principles later.

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48 Gary Kinnaman, *Overcoming the Dominion of Darkness*, p. 143.

### *Solomon's "Noble Truths"*<sup>49</sup>

Kocman points out a methodology of dialoguing with followers of Buddhists, using the theme of suffering. Suffering is something we all have in common. It is a universal woe.

Solomon spoke about suffering centuries before Buddha, but came to a different conclusion. Instead of being released into nothingness, Solomon declared that we would be released from suffering as we found ourselves in God. "Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the whole duty of man" (Ecclesiastes 12:13 KJV). This is something outside of us. In fact, it is Someone outside of us — whereas the Buddhist suffers alone, looking inward, and has no solace other than the possibility or hope of rebirths and eventual non-existence or, in some cases, becoming part of an impersonal, universal force.

So, what are Kocman's dialogical points?

- This life is full of suffering.
- Life's suffering stems from our desires.
- We can be redeemed, even through suffering.
- Following the path of Jesus leads to eternal joy.

We will now examine each point.

### *This Life Is Full of Suffering*

Both Solomon and Buddha recognized that suffering is a normal part of life. Solomon expressed it this way: "Vanity of vanities... all is vanity" (Ecclesiastes 1:2 ESV). The NIV uses the word meaningless — "Meaningless! Meaningless! ... Everything is meaningless."

Ecclesiastes begins this way, so suffering and the vanities of this

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<sup>49</sup> Alex Kocman, "4 Keys to Sharing the Gospel with Buddhists." In ABWE International (blog). December 21, 2018. <https://www.abwe.org/blog/4-keys-sharing-gospel-buddhists>

world must have been tantamount in Solomon's mind. Life was vain, without meaning and purpose — something other than the great fulfillment that one would desire, even for one with riches at his disposal. In his overwhelming wisdom, Solomon saw this and even stated that life is nothing more than a vapor.

With the Buddhist, Solomon would agree that life is brief, fleeting, “a chasing after the wind” (2:14). The things of this world do not bring long-term pleasure. So, we have common ground here with the followers of Buddha.

### *Life's Suffering Stems from Our Desires*

The Buddhist would say that this suffering, this seeking after things, comes from desire. Do away with desire and you eventually eliminate suffering. Unlike the Buddhist, Solomon would lay the problem of suffering at the feet of sin. Man is suffering as a result of original sin, and on his own is incapable of doing good. Our suffering is from separation from the God who created us (Romans 3:23.) True, the desire for the forbidden fruit led to our separation from God, which is the true cause of suffering.

### *We Can Be Redeemed, Even through Suffering*

The Romans had a saying: “*Per aspera ad astra.*” (“Through suffering to the stars.”) In this line of thinking, man, seeing his condition, looks for a solution.

Solomon shows us in Ecclesiastes 3:17-19 that all things suffer the same fate, whether man or beast. And in verse 20 he writes, “All go to the same place; all come from dust, and to dust all return.” Kocman writes, “God acted scandalously, exchanging his good *karma* for our bad, imputing his own infinite supply of good *karma* to all who trust him.” This he accomplished by sending his own Son who took our suffering upon himself, becoming sin for us (Philippians 2:3-11; Hebrews 2:9, 10).

Rather than going through a multitude of rebirths, each of us is made a new creation (2 Corinthians 5:17). We do not end life by being absorbed into nothingness. We have life that goes beyond this temporal realm, eternal life (John 11:25-26) — and the final hope of resurrected life.

### *Following the Path of Jesus Leads to Eternal Joy*

One may ask a Buddhist, if you are speaking with a person who truly thinks about his future, whether the prospect of becoming non-existent really gives one joy and hope. I would think not. The path of Jesus, on the other hand, leads to life. Yes, during this earthly sojourn we must practice self-denial (Luke 14:33) and find our life in Jesus alone (Matthew 10:39). But self-denial does not lead to extinction. It leads to glory (Romans 8:17). “Let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles. And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith” (Hebrews 12:1-2 KJV; the NIV phrases it “the pioneer and perfecter of faith”). Jesus led the way for us. He also perfected our salvation, our liberation from sin and suffering.

Kocman shares a vital truth that every Buddhist needs to hear: “If anyone responds to Christ in trust, asking him to take their bad karma and give him his own righteousness, life takes on new meaning knowing that ‘the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us’ (Romans 8:18 ESV).”

## CONCLUSION

Buddhism, like Hinduism, is a very complex religion. The complexities of branches or sects, concepts and precepts, make this a difficult religion to understand and in which to do church planting. As in many world religions, the practitioners often have a vague

idea of their religious beliefs and Scriptures, and practice their faith out of tradition or a sense of nationalism.

Those who would plant churches in the context of Buddhism require lots of patience and fortitude. Like church planting among any people group or religion, it requires much prayer and the working of God's Spirit to effect change.

## PART TWO

*Bob Craft*

### BUDDHISM, AN EVER-CHANGING FACE

Major religions are often referred to as "worlds." The "Buddhist world" is one such category which we shall discuss in this second half of the chapter on Buddhism. The term implies rather correctly that people who adhere to Buddhism live in a particular sphere of existence made up of complex, intertwining spiritual and religious ecosystems. Buddhism creates its own atmosphere and religious cosmos of complex blends of religious, social and philosophical systems that influence the daily lives of between 500 million and up to 1 billion.

In the earth's ecosystems, the same winds that bring moisture from the oceans and produce rain on one range of mountains and forests will also blow across vast deserts as dry winds, which swirl toward other merging systems to produce both storms and sunshine as they continue their paths across vastly differing terrain.

In the same way, Buddhism, with its blend of natural, spiritual, social, and religious influences, rarely looks identical as it moves from place to place and culture to culture. Even Buddha images change significantly from culture to culture. They range from having cherubic, childlike features to sleek feminine features and even a muscular warrior in full headdress. They go from dark, somber, and emaciated to light colored, obese, happy images.

### *Buddhist Worldview*

The Buddhist worldview contains three worlds, as is reflected in the images on the soles of the feet of many Buddha statues, especially the reclining Buddha images in a variety of countries. The three worlds depicted are the *inanimate* (spirit), the *animate world* (physical) and the *temporal world*, which is the present — but temporary — existence of the Buddha (and Buddhist adherents) in the other two worlds.

This understanding of the world helps explain why Buddhism is often mixed with folk animism and spirit worship. There is no Creator of the animate, physical world in their worldview. But there is a world of spiritual forces, godlike deities, and invisible powers. Belief in the existence of these powers is most often displayed in “spirit houses” that are erected on almost every property in Southeast Asia. Homes and businesses as well as random roadside shrines near trees or other perceived sacred objects have offerings of food and incense around them for fear that the territorial spirits would be offended otherwise. It is not uncommon to see small figurines of people and animals surrounding what looks like a miniature Buddhist temple. Drink and food offerings are left nearby and leis of flowers often drape the miniature shrines.

Buddhist people generally believe that as humans, we are left to struggle in our temporary existence with the suffering that the visible and invisible world inflict upon us. Humans must fear and reverence them to minimize life’s suffering. There is no single, true God. There is no Savior. There is only the suffering of human existence or the cessation of suffering through achieving non-existence (Nirvana).

The Buddhist worldview is based on one main “truth.” That “truth” is “suffering.” The practice of Buddhism, then, follows a path to define and alleviate suffering. The definition of *suffering* involves the discomfiting desire for more of anything. Even things we

would consider good are on the Buddhist list of desires that cause suffering.<sup>50</sup> In that sense, even the desire to love is considered something that causes suffering, just as much as hate does. The desire or emotion itself is a violation serious enough to keep one out of the state of Nirvana.<sup>51</sup>

Nirvana could be seen as a state of floating, like a boat suspended on calm seas between water and air. Buddhists seek to be right with the universe. They want to achieve a sense of wholeness, completeness, and oneness with the spirit world and the physical world.

Unlike our Christian faith, which begins and ends with the loving, gracious God of creation, Buddhism originates, germinates, and terminates in an effort for humans to seek and find a tranquil state of being on their own. The result is a religion focused on looking inward and acting outward. Always trying to find tranquility and inner peace while battling the forces of invisible spirits, the Buddhist seeks to end the dissonance and angst caused by the desires and drives of nature, the human body, and human relationships. The Buddhist struggles with stressful co-existence with other humans and the common emotions we all feel.

When you add the realities of the spirit world that surrounds them — the unseen principalities and powers that also battle against the tranquility they seek — you find the deep dilemma that the Buddhists of the world face in their relentless quest for true and lasting peace. They are not seeking to escape hell, or even go to heaven. Buddhists are trying to find a state of peace in their journey through this physical world. They believe that when they find that peace, they will escape existence altogether and enter the state of Nirvana — freedom from the endless cycle of personal reincarnations, with

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50 Editor's note: "The Buddhist sense of suffering is slightly different from the Christian one or a typical 'western' understanding over it. It adds to the dissonant expectations when worldly desires are not met."

51 Editor's note: "Desires are cravings or expectations that connect humans to the physical world and doesn't allow them to free themselves into a transcendental state. These cravings are for things like physical pleasure, wealth, immortality, love, things that deepen the connection to this world. 'worldly cravings'."

their consequent suffering, as a result of the extinction of individual passion, desire, hatred, and delusion. The word *Nirvana* comes from the Páli word *nibbana*, which means becoming “extinguished.”

Karma is another key concept in Buddhism. The Merriam-Webster Dictionary defines it as “the force generated by a person's actions held in Hinduism and Buddhism to perpetuate transmigration and in its ethical consequences to determine the nature of the person's next existence” (that is, reincarnation). It is the combined forces of all our personal actions (whether good or bad) that follow us into the next life. Such actions may result in good or bad impressions on one's soul which affects the soul's next destination. This is different from the popular Western view of “what goes around, comes around,” Which is often more immediate in nature.

Can you imagine how a human being would feel trying to figure out whether the good outweighs the bad to help one into the next stage of temporal existence? Most Buddhists would like to be set free of the pull or influence of their past actions. They know they need to do something to break free, but can never seem to achieve it — for, as we know from the New Testament, “All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Romans 3:23). Buddhists are seeking a release from the past state of suffering and, through their own effort, are at the same time seeking to find a state of peace. Buddhism seeks no advocate, no mediator, no Savior to be free of the Karma that will result in them remaining in an existence of suffering or with an inability to achieve contentment.

In true Buddhism, the goal of life is not to achieve a final state of bliss in an eternal life in heaven. The goal is to disappear forever — to be absorbed into the cosmic state of tranquility so as not to reincarnate into another miserable state of existence as a low caste human or, worse yet, an animal or other living creature of low estate. In this sense, Buddhism is very different from the legalism of the scribes and Pharisees of Jesus' day, when a form of external rules were to be obeyed. It is more about being free from a realization



that in their deepest being they are not in a “right” or “holy” state unscathed by the urges, desires, and actions that are against some higher or noble state of tranquility. Even the concept of sin is not well understood by most Buddhists because in their minds, the term most likely means a “breaking of a Buddhist rule of conduct.” Sin is not a violation of the True and Living God’s law of love, or a broken relationship with Him. In their system there is no ultimate Savior. There is no loving Creator of this natural world or this transient state of physical existence. And there is certainly no mediator between the physical and spiritual world.

As believers in Jesus, we know that Buddhists will never find what they are looking for apart from Christ. The supposed results of “Karma” can only be changed by the Lord Jesus Christ, but they do not know it nor can they comprehend it. In reaching out to Buddhists, we need to offer Jesus as the answer to the actions of the past which they fear will prevent them from reaching perfect peace. Karma is a very unforgiving concept. The Buddhist fears that every action of one’s existence has consequences, whether good or bad, and a Buddhist would expect to keep reincarnating until in some future life they would find the elusive place of tranquility, being and doing only “right” in the state of Nirvana. We need to offer a peace that is beyond our own understanding. They need a rest that is only found in Jesus Christ, a rest that is given by grace alone through trusting in Him.

## CHALLENGES WE FACE IN REACHING OUT TO BUDDHISTS

A simple list makes the challenges clear. Buddhists...

- Do not believe in the existence of a Creator God of the human race and natural world
- Have no desire to keep living forever, even in a place like Heaven or the New Creation
- Have no desire to escape a future place called “hell”

- Have no biblical understanding of sin, but adhere to the concept of Karma
- Do not believe in any type of Savior as they do not believe in sin as we know it
- Rely solely on their own detachment to end their own suffering
- Perform acts of compassion and “good works” to counterbalance “bad Karma”
- Blend their beliefs with local customs and religions (Folk Buddhism)
- Embrace and fear local spirits which torment them even to the point of demon possession

These beliefs have traditionally led to very few Christian believers in Buddhist nations. These Buddhist beliefs and practices have made them quite resistant to the gospel as it has been traditionally presented in the West. Let’s look at a simple Bible verse and consider it through the worldview of a Buddhist.

| Bible Verse – John 3:16                         | Buddhist thought process   |
|---|--|
| <i>For God</i>                                  | (Which god are you talking about?)   |
| <i>so loved</i>                                 | (But a god cannot have desires of love.)   |
| <i>the world</i>                                | (Which of the 3 worlds are you talking about?)   |
| <i>that he gave His only son</i>                | (So this god is a person? But gods do not have human sons!)                                      |
| <i>that whoever believes in him</i>             | (I believe in gods. Give me an image of him to pray to.)   |
| <i>will not die but could have eternal life</i> | (But I do not want to live forever, reincarnating over and over. I want to go out of existence!) |

As you can quickly see, almost every Buddhist belief is a barrier to what we consider a simple gospel presentation. We simply must take a different approach, very different from a traditional, presentational approach.

Even the languages of Asia present a challenge. They lend themselves to much more ambiguous descriptions and conclusions than the more precise language and grammatical structure of Western languages. To try to be theologically precise and doctrinally articulate becomes far more difficult in an Asian context and language. In many Asian languages, pronouns have no gender specificity, and usually there are no specific articles in front of nouns. Also, the absence of verb tenses and precise conjugation leaves Westerners wondering who or what in a sentence is the subject and object. Westerners have little understanding of the importance of Asian sentence order and context to convey meaning. These factors (plus many more) often prevent Westerners from being able to present the gospel clearly in the Buddhist parts of the world, unless they have had many years of language and cultural experience.

In order to reach a Buddhist heart with the message of Jesus, where do you start?

- It is not simply going to be a compelling religious argument. (Buddhism is an older religion than Christianity by more than 500 years.)
- It is not going to be a method that has been developed in a non-Buddhist environment.
- It is not going to be an appeal based simply on fear of hell or the attraction of heaven.
- It is not going to be an appeal based on a Christian definition of sin with an accompanying “sinner’s prayer.”
- It is not going to be a presentation based simply on images of Jesus. Whether the images are printed or digital, that will not be enough to convince Buddhists to abandon the ornate, crafted images that represent the religion that has dominated their daily lives for millennia.
- It is not going to be a presentation of a religion filled with things to do and things not to do. They already have that in the form of 277 ethical and moral standards of Buddhism, which are to be followed exactly.

Buddhists are looking for relief from the effects of daily existence. The cry of the Buddhist heart is for an elusive peace — a state of mind that brings deep, inner peace. Buddhism is a religion that suppresses emotions and desires, deeming them to be something that keeps a person from achieving the goal of Nirvana (non-existence). In the Buddhist mind, emotions and desires are only *root causes* for a person to remain trapped in reincarnation for still another round of suffering. Every time they fail to overcome their desires and emotions, or every time they do something that violates a moral standard of Buddhism, they are destined to experience bad Karma. Devotion to Buddhist ceremonies and rituals are a duty to try to gain some kind of merit to counteract bad Karma. The ceremonial chanting of Buddhist priests can be done in the ancient Páli language, which is not even understood by the vast majority of devotees. It is totally unlike the worship of the True God “in Spirit and in truth.”

## BEST PRACTICES FOR PLANTING A CHURCH IN A BUDDHIST CONTEXT

In my experience in Southeast Asia, it takes quite some time after a Buddhist person is exposed to a Christian believer — even a believer who understands Buddhism deeply — for a Buddhist to be able to respond to the gospel. The process of discipleship also may take quite some time before one sees them become a baptized believer in Jesus Christ. Buddhists especially need a “renewing of their mind” that can only come through the enlightening brought by the Holy Spirit. There is no quick or easy way to share the gospel and make disciples, especially given the many “trappings” that sometimes accompany a Western presentation of the abundant life in Christ, the things that hold us to this earth (greed, capitalism, the desire for nice houses and cars, etc.)

There are some principles we have discovered over more than two decades of church planting in Southeast Asia that we have found helpful. Sharing the gospel with Buddhists is not unlike what

the early church encountered in reaching out to the idolatrous gentiles of the Roman empire.

Yes, I am sending you to the Gentiles to open their eyes, so they may turn from darkness to light and from the power of Satan to God. Then they will receive forgiveness for their sins and be given a place among God's people, who are set apart by faith in me. (Acts 26:17-18 NLT2)

They tell how you turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God, and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead — Jesus, who rescues us from the coming wrath. (1 Thessalonians 1:9-10)

The spirit world of most Buddhist cultures is filled with images, amulets, incense, and symbolic trappings. The burning of spirit strings, figurines, and amulets happens regularly as Buddhist people come to know the true and living God and forsake these images as part of fully embracing faith in Jesus.

Stories of deliverance from depression and from troubling demonic spirits often accompany church planters as they bring the message of light and peace to those in bondage to spirits. These spirits can be local or ancestral. They are often embodied in images or objects of worship such as trees, rocks, or other inanimate representations of the invisible spirit world which surrounds and engulfs them.

Many of those who are involved in animism and idolatry describe literal, physical symptoms of the spirits that oppress them. They often see apparitions and feel physical symptoms of the presence of these spirits. Many have expressed to me the feeling of some heavy weight laying on their chest at night until they go and make an offering at the spirit shrine nearby. I have met people who needed to have chains and restraints put on them at night to keep them from

harming themselves or others. I have met others who were literally starving themselves to death in order to receive visions and messages from the spirits.

Here are some recommendations for church planters among Buddhists.

### *Acknowledge Spiritual Darkness — and Pray*

The spirit world of folk Buddhists is a world dominated by fear and spiritual darkness. Sharing the gospel among them must be approached with a great deal of prayer and spiritual discernment. The degree of bondage and spiritual blindness of Buddhists demands that the Christian worker needs to possess Divine spiritual power and authority to break through the spiritual resistance.

### *Set Aside Conventional Strategies*

Religious arguments, doctrinal statements or standard gospel presentations have little to no impact on Buddhists, especially the everyday village variety.

Descriptions of God in a Trinitarian construct are confusing and unhelpful in the early stages of the evangelization of Buddhists. They already have a myriad of spirits and forces they worship. Focus on Jesus alone as the Creator God (John 1:1).

### *Invite Prayer*

Almost always, Buddhists are seeking relief from things that are troubling them or causing them to suffer pain or anguish. Have them pray to Jesus and call upon His Name, asking Jesus to reveal Himself, to powerfully manifest Himself to them as the true and living God to relieve their suffering and to reach contentment in Christ.

Prayers for the sick and the demon possessed are often seen in the early steps of evangelism and one of the first things that a church planter is asked to do after entering a village.

### *Choose Context-Appropriate Stories*

Focus on stories from the Bible on Jesus' ability to remove the "bad Karma" of all past actions and give them a sense of peace unlike any they have ever known.

Discipleship should begin with the stories and teachings of Jesus that build faith, display the power of Jesus over everything, and introduce them to His words and teaching.

One of the most noticeable changes you will see is the pure joy and peace that they will show after truly believing in Christ. They will soon begin the process of removing the trappings of Buddhist images from their homes and other amulets from their bodies as they yield themselves to Jesus and the power of His Word. Water baptism often becomes a rich and meaningful expression of a washing away of the old life with its fears and entering into the freedom and peace that Jesus offers.

I have often thought that what Buddhists are really looking for is the *shalom* (peace) that can only come in Christ — the assurance of His blessing, Presence and Love. This peace can only come as one dies to self in Christ and begins to live in Him and for Him alone. So actually, Jesus is the answer to the deepest longing that Buddhism represents. Jesus gives an inner peace that ultimately yields to eternal peace in which a life can find ultimate rest.

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. The follower of Buddha believes the only way to be delivered from desire and Karma is to follow the Eightfold Path. How will you bring the truth about sin to the follower of Buddha and the need for Someone else to suffer for you for the remission of your sin?
2. How will you explain what being “born again” really means, given the Buddhist’s belief in reincarnation?
3. In what context would you explain Hebrews 9:27 to a follower of Buddha?
4. List at least two differences between the two major branches of Buddhism (Theravada and Mahayana).

## PERSONAL NOTES

*Please use this space for writing your own reflection or a prayer regarding the content of this chapter.*

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# Church Planting in the Context of Hinduism

*Mohan Chacko and Hiralal Solanki*

*Epilogue by Arbin Pokharel*

It is evident even to a casual observer that Hindus do not constitute a monolithic group. They belong to many cultures, and their faith, rituals, festivals, and other religious practices vary considerably from place to place. That means there can be no uniform strategy or pattern for church planting among Hindus.

In this chapter, we will not try to describe the religion in detail. That is impossible because of the complexity of the Hindu faith. Our purpose, rather, is to survey some aspects of Hindu religion and culture that are most relevant for church planting. Then we will discuss their implications for church planting.

## AN OVERVIEW OF HINDUISM

### *History*

Hinduism is an ancient religion. Some would even describe it as a religion without a beginning — *Sanatana Dharma* (eternal religion). The unwritten history of Hinduism is traced back to about 3500 B.C.

In ancient times, travellers such as Megasthenes from Greece (302-298 B.C.), Fa Hien from China (A.D. 405-411), Al Beruni from Persia (A.D. 1024-1030), Ibn Batuta from Morocco (A.D. 1333-1347), and Marco Polo from Italy (A.D. 1254-1324) told glorious tales about India and its religions.

Although it is primarily an Indian religion, Hinduism has spread almost to the extent of the known world. In its heyday, it influenced a significant portion of the world's civilizations. Hindu cultural and religious influence is evident in most of Southeast Asia. Countries such as Indonesia, Thailand, Myanmar, Malaysia, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, Bhutan, and Nepal are some examples.<sup>1</sup>

Hinduism's influence is greater than its numbers. Swami Vivekananda (1863-1902) opened the floodgates for Hinduism to flow into the world when he spoke at the World Parliament of Religions in Chicago in 1893. Quoting from the *Bhagavad Gita*, one of Hinduism's holy texts, he said: "Whosoever comes to Me, through whatsoever form, I reach him; all men are struggling through paths which in the end lead to me."<sup>2</sup> The intensity of his nine years of mission in the West and in India, his output of spiritual, intellectual, literary, and organizational work, and the traveling involved were unprecedented for that era. He was a man with a message, and he delivered it fearlessly and intensely.

One example of the growing influence of Hinduism is the huge popularity of yoga throughout the world. One can find a yoga center in almost every city. Since 2015, even the United Nations has celebrated an International Day of Yoga every June 21. Hindus are very visible in the so-called First World as top leaders in business, politics, and other areas.

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1 See the chapter "Hinduism outside India" in K. M. Sen, *Hinduism*, 86-90. See also the Wikipedia page "Hinduism by Country," [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hinduism\\_by\\_country](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hinduism_by_country) (accessed March 12, 2021)

2 Vivekananda, *Speeches and Writings of Swami Vivekananda*, p. 32.

## Demographics

There are approximately 1.2 billion Hindus in the world.<sup>3</sup> The majority of Hindus live in India (1.053 billion), where approximately 80% of the nation's population are considered to be Hindus. They are spread evenly throughout the country (except for a few states where there are concentrations of people of other faiths). Nepal's Hindu population is 23.5 million (81.3% of the total population). Significant numbers of Hindus also live in Bangladesh (14.3 million), Indonesia (4.4 million which makes up 62% of the population), Pakistan and others. A considerable number of Hindus live in certain South American nations; they are descendants of indentured laborers and other groups brought there.

In the First World, perhaps 1% to 3% of the population is Hindu.<sup>4</sup> Many people of non-Indian origin consider themselves adherents of the religion. To varying degrees, they follow a guru, live according to a Hindu worldview, or observe Hindu customs and traditions.

## Sacred Literature

The *Vedas* are the most important Hindu sacred literature. There are four — *Rig Veda*, *Sama Veda*, *Yajur Veda*, and *Atharva Veda*. They are considered to have been revealed by Brahman, the Supreme Spirit, and are known as Shruti, meaning “heard” from Brahman. They are believed to have been in existence centuries before Christ. Though revealed, they are considered works that evolved through the insights of many *rishis* (seers) over a number of centuries.

The *Upanishads* are commentaries, discussions and debates on the content of the *Vedas*. They also are said to have been composed over a period of centuries.

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3 <https://worldpopulationreview.com/country-rankings/hindu-countries>. Retrieved 7/7/21. All of the numbers cited in the above paragraph come from this source.

4 World Population Review, <https://worldpopulationreview.com/countries/hindu-countries/>. Accessed May 14, 2020.

In addition, there are *Puranas*, *Epics*, and *Kathas*. Most popular among them are the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*. The *Puranas*, which are of later origin than the Vedas, popularized the faith through stories, and taught ethics. Idol worship and gods in human forms emerged during the Puranic period.

The *Bhagavad Gita*, originally a part of the *Mahabharata*, has become world famous for its doctrine of *Nishkama Karma* (which means “work or duty without desire” — that is, with indifference about the outcome). During India’s struggle for independence from the British, the *Gita* became very popular through freedom fighters like Mahatma Gandhi and Bal Gangadhar Tilak, who wrote extensively on its content and teaching. Later it was picked up by various gurus and was spread around the world. Today the teachings of the *Gita* are often compared to the Gospels.

### *Hindu Identity*

At the very outset, one stumbles at the question, “Who is a Hindu?” The question is controversial, and it has religious, political, and cultural implications. Hinduism has been defined religiously (in terms of faith and practices), culturally, geographically, and even politically. The rise of cultural nationalism has radically influenced the definition. The terms *Indian* and *Hindu* mean the same thing in the minds of many today. This has led to confused ideas, such as “all Indians are Hindus” (an “inclusivist” point of view) or “only Hindus are Indians” (an “exclusivist” one).

Even if we set aside contemporary political definitions, Hinduism simply is hard to define. It is an amorphous faith. Shashi Tharoor, in his brilliant work *Why I Am a Hindu*, points out that initially the term *Hindu* referred to a geographical entity. It was a designation employed by foreigners. Hinduism, Tharoor says, “embraces an eclectic range of doctrines and practices, from pantheism to agnosticism and from faith in reincarnation to belief in the caste system. But none of these constitutes an obligatory credo for a Hindu: there

are none.”<sup>5</sup> It was during British rule in India’s colonial period that the word *Hindu* came into use, more or less officially, to specify a religious identity.

### *Traditional Hinduism*

Hinduism is not an organized religion. It is an amalgamation of many faiths that have been assimilated into it over time — a journey from a pure animistic form (a fear-based faith) to pure philosophical deliberations, and everything that may fit in between. It has become a most complex socio-religious system and is now embedded in culture, India’s caste system, and religious nationalism.

Traditional Hinduism is “a religion without fundamentals,” says Tharoor — “no founder or prophet, no organized church, no compulsory beliefs or rites of worship, no uniform conception of the ‘good life,’ no single sacred book.” There is no compulsory dogma, not even a belief in God.<sup>6</sup> There even is an atheistic, philosophical branch within the framework of Hinduism, the materialistic Charvaka school of Hindu philosophy. Traditionally, 330 million gods and goddesses are counted in its pantheon, and one can choose which of them to worship (*Ishta Devata* means “favorite deity”), how to worship, and what one wants to believe about them. This sort of flexibility is certainly part of the appeal of Hinduism to its vast number of followers.

It has been pointed out that through the centuries Hinduism may have absorbed elements from Buddhism, Jainism, Christianity, Islam, and other faiths. An example is the teachings of the 13th-century philosopher Madhva with regard to dualism, *bhakti*<sup>7</sup>, and *grace*<sup>8</sup>. Hinduism’s syncretistic and inclusive worship practices are well known.<sup>9</sup>

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5 Shashi Tharoor, *Why I Am a Hindu*, p. 4.

6 *Ibid*, p. 2-4.

7 Bhakti refers to attachment participation, faith, or devotion to a particular god.

8 David Burnett, *The Spirit of Hinduism: A Christian Perspective on Hindu Thought*, p. 187-8.

9 For illustrations, see Tharoor, *Why I Am a Hindu*, p. 202-3.



Perhaps because of this, traditional Hinduism professes tolerance and acceptance of other faiths. The concept of *sarva dharma sambhava* teaches the equal validity of all religions.<sup>10</sup> Tolerance is more than just putting up with the other ones. This can be illustrated from the philosophy of S. Radhakrishnan, one of India's preeminent philosophers and interpreters of Hinduism to the West, whose thought includes a positive sensitivity to the truth in other religions and points of view — and even more, an appreciation and assimilation of such truths.<sup>11</sup>

Certain aspects of traditional Hinduism are highly commendable. Yet these qualities do not make the task of a church planter any easier. Hinduism's pluralism, tolerance, and syncretism can actually be a hindrance to those presenting the gospel. Contrary to adherents' claims, in the real world, "pluralistic" Hinduism has not, in fact, shown itself to be a paragon of tolerance. Harold Netland correctly reminds us that some who are considered champions of pluralism are in reality "very sophisticated and open inclusivists." They remain fully committed to their own religious traditions and convictions, and do not consider all religions to be equal paths — in spite of what they profess. What they do instead is reinterpret other religions within the basic structure of their own faiths.<sup>12</sup>

Radhakrishnan is a clear example of this approach. He accepted other religions strictly in terms of his own *advaitic* philosophy. In fact, it has been pointed out that rather than tolerance, what one finds in Radhakrishnan is animosity to other religions, especially Christianity.

Similarly, Swami Vivekananda interpreted Christ as a *Vedantin* who taught the gospel of self-realization. He insisted that Christ must be worshipped as god, but as god defined by vedantic phi-

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10 Tharoor, *Why I Am a Hindu*, 202.

11 Robert N. Minor, "Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan on the Nature of 'Hindu' Tolerance," p. 276.

12 Harold Netland, *Encountering Religious Pluralism: The Challenge to Christian Faith and Mission*, p. 213-14.

losophy. Vivekananda and Radhakrishnan affirmed a pluralistic philosophy, but they clearly did not accept the *equality* of all paths. Instead, their writings express that there is a hierarchy of truths, and an evolution towards the higher truth. *Advaita* occupies the highest level, condescendingly looking down upon all other manifestations and understandings, including Christianity. A Hindu may readily accept Christ as god. But such acceptance is not on Christian terms but on Hindu terms, as *one* of the gods (which is why the word is written with a lowercase g in this paragraph). As Vinoth Ramachandra has observed, “[t]his is simply religious imperialism masquerading as tolerance.”<sup>13</sup>

### *Political Hinduism*

Since the beginning of the 20th century, a political strand of Hinduism has been evident. It is known as the *Hindutva* movement, or as *Hindu fundamentalism*. Its philosophical roots go back to the 19th-century Hindu revival movements.

Several elements can be identified in Hindu fundamentalism. One is the goal of recovering the purity of the faith through a return to the source. Dayanand Saraswati, who founded Arya Samaj<sup>14</sup> in 1875, considered the Vedas pure and free of error. “Back to the Vedas” was Arya Samaj’s slogan.<sup>15</sup> Other aspects of this movement are its militancy and its missionary dimension. While traditional Hinduism, as we saw, professed to be a tolerant religion that accepts the equal validity of all paths to God, *Hindutva* as an ideology opposed Christianity and Islam. Today’s fundamentalist Hinduism is openly opposed to other religions. Its avowed goal is the establishment of a Hindu nation. And while traditional Hinduism claimed it had no missionary character, fundamentalist Hinduism decidedly

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13 Vinoth Ramachandra, *Faiths in Conflict? Christian Integrity in a Multicultural World*, p. 74.

14 A monotheistic Indian Hindu movement based on the infallible authority of the Vedas.

15 Burnett, *The Spirit of Hinduism*, 55; M. T. Cherian, *Hindutva Agenda and Minority Rights: A Christian Response: Study of Hindu Fundamentalism and Its Impact on Secularism in India from 1947-1997*, p. 167.

does.<sup>16</sup> It aims at the propagation of Hinduism in two ways. One is conversion of non-Hindus. The other is the re-conversion — *Ghar Vapsi* (“return to home”) — through a cleansing ceremony called *shuddhi* of Hindus who have converted to Islam and Christianity.

Political Hinduism or Hindu fundamentalism is significant for church planting because it has become a dominant movement, consolidating much power. Under its influence, opposition to conversion activities has been growing, and many states in India have laws directly prohibiting such activities. Frontline church-planting workers also need to be vigilant against illegal and extra-legal attacks on them.

On the other hand, the rise of Hindu fundamentalism has also sharpened the contrast between the various groups. Previously, people in majority Hindu cultures had a tendency to assimilate the Christian message into Hinduism, but fundamentalism by its opposition has clarified the choices. The idea of the equality of all religions can be a great obstacle to the average Hindu’s consideration of the gospel. In that sense, Hindu fundamentalism offers a greater opportunity than traditional Hinduism does to confront Hindus with the Christian message.

### *Philosophic or Intellectual Hinduism*

Philosophical or intellectual Hinduism is a complex labyrinth understood and followed by a few. Hinduism has some most original and astounding philosophies. Some of them are more famous and better propounded. They can be divided into two categories:

- *Orthodox* philosophies are those that recognize Vedic authority. These philosophies can be divided into six types: *Nyaya*, *Vaisheshika*, *Sankhya*, *Yoga*, *Purva*, and *Uttar Mimansa* (Vedanta).

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<sup>16</sup> See C. V. Mathew, *Neo-Hinduism: A Missionary Religion*, p. 20. He points out that although it professed to be a non-missionary religion, traditional Hinduism also engaged in conversion during the ancient and medieval periods

- *Heterodox* philosophies are those that do not recognize Vedic authority. The three philosophies of this type are *Charvaka*, *Jainism*, and *Buddhism*.

The six Orthodox philosophies propounded by the Vedic School sages can be divided yet again, into three sub-groups:

- *Nyaya-Vaisesika* deals with physics, chemistry, and other material sciences, and also includes logic and metaphysical studies (the search for the knowledge of God). It also deals with the atomic theory of the universe.
- *Sankhya-Yoga* deals mainly with the psychological and biological sciences. It derives the physical universe from a single source, *Prakriti*<sup>17</sup>.
- *Purva-Uttar Mimansa* philosophies relate mainly to the exposition of Brahman — that is, spiritual science. While Purva Mimansa deals with rituals (*karma kanda*), Uttar Mimansa deals with knowledge (*jnana kanda*). The latter is also known as Vedanta philosophy.

The most significant philosophical debate in intellectual Hinduism has been between the Sankhya School, which teaches dualism, and the Advaita Vedanta School, which teaches monism<sup>18</sup>. Adi Shankara, an 8th-century philosopher from South India, was the most capable exponent of the Advaita School. The basic teaching of Advaita (“not two”) is that the world does not exist outside of Brahman, which is a type of monism. From Shankara come the famous sayings “*Aham Brahmasmi*” (“I am Brahman”) and “*Tat tvam asi*” (“Thou art that”). The message is that the world is in God; God is not external to the world. The soul and Brahman are not two. The apparent distinction between them is *maya* (illusion).<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> *Prakriti* can be described as a primal creative or natural force.

<sup>18</sup> Monism is the idea that all reality can be summed up or explained in one substance or single reality. For example it denies a distinction between God and the world.

<sup>19</sup> Sen, *Hinduism*, p. 82-83.

The 11th-century philosopher Ramanuja propounded a qualified non-dualism which distinguished between Brahman and individual souls. According to Ramanuja, everything is within the Brahman, but individual souls can be differentiated.<sup>20</sup>

The implications of Advaita philosophy are far-reaching. Traditionally, it has contributed to an understanding that the world is unreal<sup>21</sup> and the universe is only the projection or manifestation of the divine reality. A mindset that does not affirm the truth and reality of creation cannot conceive of human personality, the possibility of depravity, or the need for God's redemptive activity. According to Vedanta philosophy, human beings are essentially divine, and one day they will be absorbed into the supreme. This is radically different from the Christian conception of human individuality and the moral and eternal value of life. There can be no concept of sin if humans are understood to be essentially divine — essentially good. Various beings are understood to reveal God to varying extents, "but even the worst of the world cannot be dismissed as completely undivine, fit only to be cast into hell fire."<sup>22</sup>

Salvation, for the Hindu, is basically self-realization — the individual soul reaching its supreme potential and merging with the universal soul. One attains self-realization through the three *margas*:

- *jnana marga*, the way of knowledge
- *karma marga*, the way of action (*karma marga*)
- *bhakti marga*, the way of devotion

All three are considered valid means, but *bhakti* — devotion — is the most preferred.<sup>23</sup> *Bhakti* gained importance among the Vaishnavas (worshippers of Vishnu) and the Saivites (worshippers of Shiva) in the south, and from there spread to other parts of India.

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20 Sen, *Hinduism*, p. 84

21 According to philosopher S. Radhakrishnan, "The world is not so much denied as reinterpreted." *The Hindu View of Life*, p. 48.

22 Radhakrishnan, *The Hindu View of Life*, p. 51.

23 Bruce J. Nicholls, "Hinduism," p. 146-7

### Popular Hinduism

The large majority of Hindus subscribe to what may be called *popular Hinduism*. The average Hindu is captivated not by the complex philosophy of the Vedas and the Upanishads but by the stories of the *puranas* and their heroes. This is not to say that philosophic and popular Hinduism are totally discontinuous; the popular form is a development and adaptation of the Vedic concepts. "The Puranic faith integrated the Vedic religion into the daily worship of ordinary people."<sup>24</sup> The *Nirguna Brahma* (God without attributes) came to be worshipped as *Saguna Brahma* in popular Hinduism.

Popular Hinduism is the result of an assimilation of various elements, both native and foreign. Tharoor points out that temples and idol worship began in India with the arrival of the Greeks in the 4th century B.C.<sup>25</sup> Religious practices of the Dravidians, tribal religions, animists, and other groups were incorporated and absorbed in popular Hinduism. According to David Burnett, activities of the spirit world "are important aspects of the life of the villagers of India, and cannot be overlooked as 'mere superstition' They are as much a manifestation of the spirituality of India as is the teaching of the *Vedas and Upanishads*."<sup>26</sup> Caste system (which will be explained shortly), polytheism, idolatry, fear of evil spirits, animism, astrology, asceticism, immorality, demonolatry, and numerous other influences are part of what can be called popular Hinduism.

S. D. Ponraj lists these characteristics of popular Hinduism<sup>27</sup>:

- Belief in numerous gods and goddesses
- Belief in idols and temple worship
- Belief in rituals, offerings, and festivals
- Belief in pilgrimages
- Belief in supernatural powers

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24 Tharoor, *Why I Am a Hindu*, p. 57.

25 *Ibid.* p. 57.

26 Burnett, *The Spirit of Hinduism*, p. 112.

27 S. Devasagayam Ponraj, *An Introduction to Missionary Anthropology*, p. 117-8.

- Belief in blood sacrifice
- Belief in magic, witchcraft, sorcery, and the evil eye
- Belief in astrology
- Belief in gurus and godmen

He rightly points out that westernized Christianity is not always able to answer the many questions raised by popular religion. An evangelistic message cannot be a simple recital of formulations from the West. Church planters need to contextualize the message to address the belief system of popular Hinduism. For example, fear of evil spirits must be confronted with a view of the atonement of Christ, and it must be made clear that it is more than judicial — that Christ secured victory over evil powers through his death and resurrection. Belief in gurus and godmen can be used to introduce Christ as the true guru. (See the discussion of gurus below).

### *Caste System*

Church planters cannot afford to ignore the caste system, which may be the most persistent social reality among Hindus. The influence of caste system has been felt even among adherents of other religions, such as Christianity, that claim to be more egalitarian. It is a vertical social stratification, with four main castes:

- *Brahmin* (priestly) at the top
- *Kshatriya* (warrior)
- *Vaishyas* (merchants)
- *Shudras* (servants)

There are also numerous sub-castes. Some individuals fall outside the formal caste categories; they are referred to as the *Dalits*.

Hindu scholars have used various arguments to try to disavow the evil of caste system, but it remains a powerful social factor. Shashi Tharoor, for example, argues that while India has castes, what can be called a caste *system*, with its rigidities, was a British

innovation. It is also argued that there is no scriptural basis for the extreme discrimination associated with caste system.

Since the 19th century, many reformers have tried to reform Hinduism to mitigate its evil effects. So has the Indian government, which after India achieved independence from Britain in 1947 passed social legislation that has made untouchability and discrimination based on caste illegal. Strong affirmative action that favors lower castes has given them greater advantages, especially in jobs, admission to colleges, and so on. Many educated Hindus would affirm — at least in principle — that a caste structure is undesirable. Given all these factors, it would be reasonable to conclude that the worst aspects of the caste system have been removed, or at least moderated. Yet caste remains a powerful social, economic, and political factor in Hindu society. Social interaction, marriage alliances, and the like are very much governed by caste even today.

The caste system has robbed millions of people of their dignity and rights, as a result of which there have been many cases of mass conversions to Buddhism, Islam, and Christianity. While it is a cause for celebration that many choose to become Christians, these mass movements have created problems for the church as well. They have given substance to the charge often levelled against Christians that conversion is primarily for materialistic gain and human dignity rather than for spiritual reasons. This, of course, is a serious charge. Indeed, it is true that an individual's motivation for coming to Christ is not always a spiritual change of heart towards the living God; often, the person is seeking an escape from the indignities meted out in their previous religion. This creates a problem for the church in receiving people of a lower class, like the Dalits, as part of the church. Many have no loyalty to Christ and Christianity, and may end up deserting the faith in the face of opposition or better opportunities. On the other hand, some point out that the search for dignity and fellowship is part of what the gospel offers, and that seekers should be received into the church with open arms. The challenge for the church is to affirm the dignity offered in the gos-



pel and wholeheartedly extend its fellowship to people of all backgrounds across caste lines.<sup>28</sup>

Caste is a significant factor in church planting in other ways, too. While strongly denouncing caste discrimination as evil, the Church Growth School<sup>29</sup> has taken a more realistic approach to the reality of caste. The Homogenous Unit Principle favors planting of churches along caste lines as a practical necessity. Dr. Donald McGavran enunciates the basic truth of this principle: people “like to become Christians without crossing racial, linguistic, or class barriers.”<sup>30</sup> He illustrates this with respect to caste by showing that churches grew when converts did not have to cross caste barriers, whereas fear of exclusion from caste prevented people from becoming Christians. In defense of the Homogenous Unit Principle, it is argued that in every human society, there is discrimination that would be judged as evil by the Bible,<sup>31</sup> and that cultural diversity is not always an expression of human sin.<sup>32</sup> Therefore, it is considered unwise to single out caste discrimination at the evangelizing stage of church planting. Overcoming caste discrimination belongs to the perfecting work of the church, according to these missiologists influenced by the teachings of McGavran.

On the other hand, there are those who argue that the Homogenous Unit Principle contradicts the very essence of the gospel, which sees reconciliation as foundational. “The breaking down of the barriers that separate people in the world was regarded as an essential *aspect of the gospel*, not merely as a result of it,” says C. René Padilla.<sup>33</sup> Understood in this manner, crossing caste barriers is part and parcel of one’s conversion to Christ.

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28 Sunand Sumithra, “Towards Evangelical Theology in Hindu Cultures,” p. 158-9.  
29 A church growth movement popularized by Donald McGavran at the School of World Mission in Pasadena, California.

30 Donald A. McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth*, p. 198.

31 McGavran himself speaks of promoting casteism as “sanctified racism” and says it must be “absolutely renounced.” Donald A. McGavran, “Discipling without Dismantling the Tribe, Tongue and People,” p. 255.

32 Roy Pointer, “The Homogenous Unit Principle,” p. 114.

33 C. René Padilla, “The Unity of the Church and the Homogenous Unit Principle,” p. 300. Italics original.

Caste feelings and discrimination are very much a problem for the church in Hindu communities. Separate congregations — even separate graveyards — for different castes are not unknown. However, this goes against the biblical teaching on the unity of church. Therefore, to develop churches along caste lines is unacceptable because it is contrary to the gospel.

There is no doubt that the caste factor is a challenge for church planting among Hindus. The so-called upper castes, in particular, may not be willing to interact socially and partake in the Lord's Supper with individuals of lower-status castes. Totally ignoring caste sensitivities may deprive these groups of the opportunity to hear the gospel and respond to Christ. A potential believer needs to understand and accept the full implications of the gospel before he can consider becoming a disciple of Christ. Therefore, at least as a strategic necessity<sup>34</sup> one has to take note of caste sensitivities. However, as a foundational premise, the church should have a commitment to reconciliation between groups. The practical details of how this could be worked out will depend on the particular situation.

### *Idolatry*

Idolatry is another potential hindrance for the gospel and church planting. Although idol worship did not become part of Hindu practice until after the Vedic period, and although it was rejected by some Hindu reformers, in the 21st century the vast majority of Hindus worship idols.<sup>35</sup> In the past, Christian missionaries often condemned and ridiculed this. They saw a biblical basis for such condemnation. This has changed in recent times with the introduction of legal provisions against denigration of other faiths, particularly in India. This is a crucial issue for church planting work among Hindus. One cannot deny that the Bible profoundly, explicitly prohibits idolatry. Is it necessary for church planters to condemn idolatry in

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34 B. V. Subbamma supports caste-based churches as "a provisional and temporary measure, a step in the right direction." "A Lesson from B. V. Subbamma," p. 277.

35 Tharoor, *Why I Am a Hindu*, p. 58, 117.

their preaching? Or, should they play down their criticism? This is a serious question.

There is no place for ridiculing idolatry from an attitude of cultural superiority. We must always remember that what may seem meaningless to us, or even objectionable, is sacred to those who practice it. It behooves us to express respect for the sacred spheres of others. The Bible treats idolatry as a theological issue, not a cultural one. Those who practice idolatry are not condemned as culturally inferior. This comes through clearly in the writings of John Calvin, who understands idolatry as a theological problem for *all* human beings. Fallen human nature “is a perpetual factory of idols,” he says (Inst. I, xi, 8). He includes Christians in his condemnation of idolatry.

Some rightly point out that the Bible contains passages that ridicule idolatry. But that does not grant us the right to ridicule idolatry or break idols. What God, in his sovereign plan, has done through his prophets is not necessarily for us to imitate. It is important, too, to note that the Bible’s condemnations of idolatry are directed primarily against the idolatry of God’s own people. God’s complaint is that even though they know the true and living God, they have abandoned him to serve the gods of the nations.

Church planters should withhold their criticism of idolatry and similar things in their preaching until such time as the hearers themselves are in a position to assess these doctrines and make their own judgement. It is better to make a positive presentation of the Christian view of God while also expressing a healthy respect for other religious views — no matter how erroneous those views may be, in our opinion. As Roger Hedlund writes, “Judgement on their gods? Let God be the judge. Our call is to help others in their quest for God. Christians do so by bearing witness that the Light is come, and His Name is Jesus.”<sup>36</sup>

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36 Roger E. Hedlund, *Evangelization and Church Growth: Issues from the Asian Context*, p. 114.

## Gurus

Gurus are a significant part of Indian religions, particularly of Hinduism. A *guru* is a teacher, one who dispels darkness. But he is not merely a teacher in the academic sense. He is also a religious guide — a mentor who imparts knowledge, often secret knowledge, that is necessary for salvation (*moksha*, “liberation”). Thus, the guru has an essential role. He is more than a guide, and in some ways he is more important than a god. According to Hindu scriptures, a guru is to be worshipped because he is the one who shows what is *dharma*.<sup>37</sup> Some Hindus even identify a guru with god, which is not inconsistent with Hindu monism. A guru’s authority is unquestionable. In recent years, gurus have played a major role in spreading Hinduism in the West.

The significant role of gurus in Hindu communities is important for church planters to understand. Gurus are enormously popular in Hindu society. Though many of them subscribe to the general philosophy of Hinduism, each guru has his own unique teachings and emphases — and those interpretations or teachings shape a follower’s spiritual identity more than any grand philosophy does. In short, rather than simply regarding people as Hindus in a general sense, church planters working in that context must understand the beliefs and views that individuals hold to as followers of a particular guru.

For those presenting Christ, guruism presents some opportunities — but also some dangers.

Comparisons have been made between gurus in Hinduism to Christ as Rabbi — a term which is translated in several Indian languages as guru. There are, indeed, many significant parallels. Christ commands His disciples to follow and obey Him completely. He should be their one and only guru (Matthew 23:8, 10).<sup>38</sup> He revealed

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37 B. B. Chaubey, “The Nature of Guruship according to the Hindu Scriptures,” p. 3-17. *Dharma*: the fulfillment of divine law or duty.

38 James Massey, “The Concept of Guruship in the New Testament,” 34-5.

God, and claimed to be the only way to God (John 14:6). These and other parallels are a good avenue for presenting Christ to Hindus, because it is language they understand.

On the other hand, presenting Christ as a guru is also perilous. The greatest danger is that Christ may be thought of as just another guru among many. In a religion in which there are any number of gods and gurus, and one is free to choose any of them, presenting Christ as another guru robs Him of His uniqueness. This is especially dangerous because in the past few years a number of gurus (or *godmen*, as they are also called) have been exposed for their unethical and immoral lifestyles.<sup>39</sup> A second danger is that since a guru is primarily a moral teacher, Hindus may assume the same is true of Christ — that is, that Christ is merely a moral teacher and law giver. This misunderstanding is already present in the Hindu mind. Many think of Christ as a great teacher, perhaps even as the greatest teacher, without understanding the redemptive significance extended.

These potential dangers need not, however, prevent us from talking of Christ as guru — so long as care is taken to highlight the holiness and uniqueness of His person and the meaning and purpose of His work.<sup>40</sup> Some Christians have found guruism in Hinduism to be worthy of emulation, not only in seeing Christ as guru but also in having human gurus and offering them obedience, love and respect.<sup>41</sup> Guruism, according to them, is not incompatible with the principles of Christianity.

### *Family*

Hindu culture is family oriented, especially in rural areas. People live together as families and extended families, and even when they are scattered for educational or employment reasons there is a sense of being connected to one's roots, culturally and as families. Fami-

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39 K. N. Panikkar, "Ungodly Men, Unholy Activities."

40 Maqbul Caleb, "The Nature of Guruship according to the Christian Tradition," 70-1. See also Vishal Mangalwadi, *The World of Gurus*, p. 235-59.

41 Vandana, *Gurus, Ashrams and Christians*, 35-41.

lies are genuine social units, not just individuals dwelling together. The elders exercise authority and provide cohesion to these units. Decisions are often made by the head of the household, often in consultation with other members of the family. Under global influences this orientation is breaking apart to a certain extent, but not significantly. Individualism on the scale that one sees in the West is not present.

There is an urgent need to critically examine our church planting strategy in view of the strong family culture of Hinduism. Many of the evangelistic strategies employed today focus on conversion of the individual. S. Vasantharaj Albert, an expert in church planting, says this has become the norm, but he points out that in Hindu contexts it is regarded as “violent extraction of individual members out of the family.”<sup>42</sup> S. D. Ponraj asserts that “the Western pattern of individual decision-making is not appropriate and effective in India.”<sup>43</sup> Pradip Ayer concurs that it is unsuitable in the Hindu context — and adds that it is also not necessarily more biblical. *Extraction evangelism* “should be absolutely avoided,” he counsels. It creates ill feeling and opposition, and even where there is no opposition, it blocks access to winning the rest of the community. Supporting his point of view with many examples from the writings of Luke in the Holy Bible, Ayer strongly argues that “household evangelism” is the pattern we should follow. A strategy should be developed to reach out to the whole household.<sup>44</sup>

## Baptism

Baptism is another issue that is significant for church planting among Hindus. Generally speaking, there is no great opposition to following Christ. To revere or even worship Christ is not always the problem in India, which, as noted above, is a land of gurus with

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42 S. Vasantharaj Albert, “Individual or Family Conversion,” p. 236.

43 S. Devasagayam Ponraj, *Church Planting Approach to Mission: Principles and Practices of Planting Churches in an Indian Rural Context*, p. 40.

44 Pradip Ayer, “Family Evangelism,” p. 237-9. NOTE: More on the ills of extraction is shared in the epilogue.

large followings. What is a problem is *conversion* — a change of allegiance from one religion to another. In Christianity, the basic external symbol of such change, of course, is baptism. Thus, baptism becomes a major hurdle for church planters.

Many of India's states now have laws that make conversion a punishable offence. But even in those that do not, there is strong anti-conversion sentiment among authorities and people of the majority community. *Forced* conversion is what is found objectionable — but all conversions are suspect, and need justification.

Legal obstacles are not the only problem. Baptism, which Christians see as a theological issue, has significant, negative sociological ramifications, and thus is disliked by many people in Hindu majority cultures. The theological dimension of baptism (“turning from idols to serve the living and true God,” 1 Thessalonians 1:9) is often dwarfed by the sociological dimension — perceived as abandoning one's native community and switching one's allegiance to an alien one. Indeed, it has been observed that many genuine, devout followers of Christ have refused to undergo baptism on account of this perception. Others have been expelled from their families not because they followed Christ, but because they underwent baptism, alienating themselves.

Thus, baptism is a serious issue for church planters. Christians baptize following the command of Christ in the Great Commission (Matthew 28:19-20). Baptism is rightly not considered optional. It is also part of the witness a believer bears upon following Christ. Yet, in a Hindu cultural context it is wise to consider whether baptism is so essential to the Christian faith that one must undergo it even at the risk of facing legal and social consequences. Church planters need to explore whether alternative rituals can be found which would avoid the offensive aspects of baptism while retaining its basic theological thrust.

Another issue relates to the timing of baptism. How soon should a convert be baptized? Although this question is relevant for believers from any religious background, it is perhaps most relevant for those coming from Hinduism or other Indian religions. The reason is that, compared to Islam, Judaism, or even Western secular culture, the Hindu worldview is more distant from the Christian worldview. Further, because Hinduism is a syncretistic, polytheistic faith, it is hard to discern whether “accepting Christ” genuinely constitutes a conversion — whether a spiritual change has really occurred. Hindus do not find it difficult to accept Christ as another god in their pantheon. Also to be kept in mind is the known tendency of many spurious agencies to rush people for baptism to meet their statistical quota.

Some genuine church planters have advocated baptizing new believers at the earliest possible time. “Give Baptism as a First Step without Much Delay,” says Ponraj. He points out that *baptizing* comes before *teaching* in the Great Commission, and points also to the example of Paul, who apparently baptized at a very early stage. Ponraj fears that delaying could result in the loss of people “both to the Church and to the Lord.”<sup>45</sup> Others feel this indicates a lack of trust in God and his sovereignty, as though conversion were a purely human endeavor. Yet the view is not without merit. At the very least, excessive waiting can unduly discourage a person who has put his trust in Christ. It can generally be agreed that baptism need not wait until fine points of doctrine are taught and learned. In our opinion, teaching can — indeed, must — follow baptism. All would agree, though, that determining whether a conversion is genuine is absolutely essential.

## Culture

Two observations are in order with regard to Indian culture. The first is that there is no place for ridiculing or demeaning Hindu culture, or replacing it with a Western or alien culture. This is generally

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45 Ponraj, *Church Planting Approach to Mission*, p. 42.



true for all situations, but is particularly true in the case of Hindus. As is evident from the discussion above, Hindu culture is ancient and sophisticated, and Hindus are rightly proud of it. Church planters must be conscious of this fact. Like all cultures, Hindu culture is affected by sin and is in need of redemption — but there is no excuse for mockery. This holds true not only for foreigners to India but also for Indian nationals who would do cross-cultural church planting there.

The second observation is that churches should be planted according to the cultural patterns of the people. Christianity must speak to the heart of the Hindu and not be seen as a foreign religion. Attention must be paid to Hindu styles of worship, mode of communication of the message, the physical details of worship to which people are accustomed (sitting on the floor, with separate seating for men and women and with footwear left outside), hymnody, church architecture, and other aspects of worship and life. As much as possible, these must be respected.<sup>46</sup> Hindu culture is diverse and changing, but church planters must pay attention to prevalent cultural patterns. Christianity has been rightly accused of being a foreign religion for too long.

## BEST PRACTICES FOR PLANTING CHURCHES IN HINDU CONTEXTS

Building on the foregoing discussion, now we shall highlight some of the best practices for church planters in Hindu contexts.

### *Power Encounter*

Earlier in this chapter, we noted that those who practice popular Hinduism often experience fear. Fear of evil spirits and of evil power is rampant. Many people struggle with illnesses, demon possession and other maladies. To overcome them, many blindly obey the

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<sup>46</sup> More best practices are shared in the epilogue.

advice of *tantriks* or use witchcraft. Some people do not have the means to consult a doctor, and in such situations it is natural for people to look for demonstrations of power.

Church planters can counter the fear of evil powers with the practice of what missiologists call *power encounter*. They should seek to understand from the Bible what it means to confront the powers of darkness and practice spiritual warfare. It is imperative, then, that church planters undertake an effective prayer ministry for a powerful working of the Holy Spirit.

Christ must be preached not only as our substitute who paid for our sins, but also as the one who conquered over evil powers and even over death. Christ is supreme and has an authority no other person has thus far exhibited.

### *Evangelize Families and Villages*

We also mentioned the problems faced when church planters use extraction evangelism, separating a convert from his family and community, and even creating hostilities. This is a problem not only among Hindus. It is faced by many community-oriented or family-oriented cultures, such as Arabic Muslims or even Latinos in Central and South America. These are collectivistic cultures. Extraction from the culture or the community results in ostracism, exclusion, persecution, or even death. Therefore, a better practice than evangelizing an individual would be to evangelize the family, or to evangelize a village. There are advantages to keeping the cultural unit intact, whether family, clan, or tribe.

### *Cultural Respect*

Development of worship groups also must be sensitive to the principles of indigenization. The style of worship, type of praise songs, seating arrangements of men and women, and other cultural issues need to be taken into account if the church planter wishes

to be effective in sowing the seed for a fruitful harvest. This bears repeating: for too long, Christianity has been rightly accused of being a foreign religion. For Christianity to incarnate into the Hindu community, it must not cause the shock which often comes when Western cultural practices are introduced.

Hindus are rightly proud of their heritage. Christian approaches to Hindus must be characterized by genuine love and due respect. There is no place for mockery, attack, condemnation, or ridicule even where our practices are opposite.

## CONCLUSION

With its complexity and profundity, Hinduism presents a great challenge to church planters. Yet one is unlikely to see elsewhere so many searching genuinely for the living God as in Hinduism. A thorough understanding of the religion and culture of Hindus is essential for all who seek to plant churches in the expanding Hindu contexts of the world.

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Being Hindu can be interpreted religiously, culturally, geographically, or politically. Explain the differences.
2. Which provides greater opportunity for the gospel — traditional Hinduism or political Hinduism?
3. How does Galatians 3:28 speak to the problem of casteism?
4. What are the pros and cons of presenting Christ as a Guru?
5. Discuss the controversy over baptism in Hindu culture.

**NOTE:** *For insights about best practices that are especially relevant to planting churches among Hindus who live in South Asia, see the epilogue that follows the bibliography.*

## PERSONAL NOTES

*Please use this space for writing your own reflection or a prayer regarding the content of this chapter.*

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## Best Practices for Church Planting Among Hindus in South Asia

*Arbin Pokharel*

As noted above, Hinduism is not one category of people, and thus there is no uniform strategy or pattern for church planting among Hindus. South Asia consists of cultures formed by religion at the core of their social structures and forged traditions, which are at its foundations. A serious student of the church who desires to plant Christ-centered churches must consider several cultural and contextual factors before attempting to plant a church in this part of the world. It is important to understand the human and social dynamics at play in church planting — not only the political and theological principles.

Some places, such as Nepal, are seeing greater growth of churches than in other parts of South Asia. Here are some key reasons why this is occurring:

- *The evident work of the Holy Spirit* expressed through shared testimonies, preaching, and charismatic gifts, particularly of healing.<sup>1</sup> God's Spirit is active, like in the days of the Apostles. Peo-

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1 Dr. Rajendra K. Rongong makes this claim in his study of sixteen of the early churches in Nepal (through 1990). See Rongong, *Early Churches in Nepal: An Indigenous Christian Movement Till 1990* (Kathmandu: Ekta Books, 2012), 101.



ple feel God's presence and effectual power convicting them and bringing desired changes in their lives.

- *Zealous witnessing by new believers* to their family and neighbors, many of whom have flooded the churches with curiosity and expectations. When people hear the gospel, believe it, and see changes in their own or their family's life, they are convicted and begin sharing it with others in their reach. This is true of any majority oral-based culture in South Asia.
- *Socio-cultural forces* such as the caste system and other dynamics that have marginalized certain groups of people. The economically poor, the sick and weak, and people who are oppressed in other ways are among these marginalized groups. More than *karma*, which is a Hindu and Buddhist concept of prescribed duty and status at birth, people feel the oppression of existing socio-cultural systems in which they find no hope of liberation. Christianity comes with a hope of liberation, so the people under this yoke are willing to jump ship instantly for practical reasons.

Against the backdrop of these cultural and religious contexts in South Asia, these best practices for church planting should be considered.

### *Gospel Hospitality*

The main reasons that churches in South Asia are growing are not about great education or ideologies. It is more the care and concern that Christians show to their neighbors. Christians have a reputation for compassion. No one cares for the poor and marginalized more than Christians. Churches must capitalize on this work and reputation as they seek to plant churches.

Hospitality comes more naturally to folks in South Asian cultures than in some other cultures. A cup of tea creates a hospitable atmo-

sphere for speaking one's heart and mind. A socially conscious and open invitation or some other gesture of friendship communicates the gospel more effectively than debates over principles and ideas. It is essential to establish and build a trusted relationship before one can be trusted with big changes. There are many ways of reaching out with the gospel, but gospel hospitality with cultural sensitivity and open arms can reach peoples' hearts.

### *God's Power to Set People Free*

People in South Asia are more spirit-conscious than in some other parts of the world, due to their backgrounds in ritual-heavy religious practices mixed with animism (active engagement with spirit worlds). Practices such as interacting with gods and goddesses, shamanism, and the visible interplay with temples and shrine-centered faith are illustrations of their spiritual worldview.

In many South Asian nations and cultures, there is still a severe lack of modern medicines and basic scientific answers to life's problems. Consequently, people look to local shamans and witch doctors who tread a path between community aspirations and the spiritual world for healing from oppression. South Asians seek a spiritual leader to address problems provoked by physical illnesses, spiritual oppression, and social-cultural burdens mixed with psychological orientations. In Nepal these individuals are called *janne* (literally, "one who knows").

Christianity offers an easier, cheaper alternative to a visit to a shaman and poses a challenge to existing stereotypes of the society. Often, people who are struggling visit a church or pastor for prayers to be set free.

Church planters and leaders must not shy away from offering Christ's power to set people free. It can become a real means to reach people's hearts and lives, and open doors for the gospel. A word of caution is necessary here: while healing is a means to outreach,

church planters must not depend fully on exorcism, nor attend to the people's longing for a quick solution, as a long-term strategy for church planting. Once people enter the Kingdom of God, they must be led into discipleship within the church community.

### *Restoration of Dignity*

Theological and cultural backgrounds in Hinduism, Buddhism, and Islam have not offered people dignity suitable to their humanity. This is evident not only in the teachings of those faiths, but also in life and culture in practice. For example, one naturally feels compassion towards a beggar in the street or towards a person from lower castes who is suffering systemic injustice. Nevertheless, mere compassion is not enough. Christian morals, ethical values, and principles must come to the forefront to lead people and their neighborhoods and wider communities in order to set people free and restore their dignity.

Works of justice and restorative programs are necessary ways a church must teach and live out the gospel in order for it to meaningfully and effectively penetrate societies. The premise must be that human beings are made in the image of God, and are endowed with worth from being loved by their maker. This is true not only while planting a church, but as the church makes its presence felt in the community that is distorted by evil practices and injustices.

### *Model: Social Restructuring into the Body of Christ*

One of the greatest barriers to church planting in South Asia is the preexisting social structure, particularly the complexities created by the caste system. One factor that led to the anti-conversion laws which exist in much of the region is that people who are in power because of caste are afraid of losing their positions. If the system fails, they will fall — so they do not want people to abandon their caste or religion.

The gospel must address these issues and rise above the preexisting culture or social structure. Once people come to believe and understand the gospel, in due time socio-cultural barriers must be uprooted and strongly opposed. Extraction evangelism must be replaced by holistic evangelism. The church is the body of Christ, which demands a comprehensive reforming of a community structure into the model of Jesus Christ — his way of life, thought, teachings, and desires. Paul's analogy of the church being the body of Christ has farther-reaching implications than is often understood in the churches in South Asia. Jesus commissioned the apostles to go and preach the gospel, make disciples, and become Christ-centered communities in the power of the Holy Spirit, so that they begin to look more like Christ.

## CONCLUSION

As the church began in the New Testament, it was committed to a few basic, routine practices that described congregations as Christ-centered churches. John Stott identifies those practices from Acts 2:42-47. They were a learning church, a caring church, a worshipping church, and an evangelizing church.<sup>2</sup>

A Christ-centered church is committed to growing in all these aspects of being a local church. Each church must practice what it is called to be and offer what by nature it must do — namely, study and preach God's word, worship the Triune God, care for people, and in this way share the good news of Jesus Christ. The church is a covenant community engaging in God-centered relationships, which should take precedence over every other activity the church engages in. Just as Jesus exemplified, a local church lives in the awareness of that relationship and partners in the mission to which God sent Jesus — namely, to be filled with the Holy Spirit to preach good news to the poor, to set captives and oppressed people free, and to proclaim the age of the Lord (Luke 4:18-19).

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2 See Stott, John. *The Message of Acts*. Downers Grove IL: IVP Academics, 1994.

The church must listen attentively to the people around them to hear and discern the best ways of reaching out to the genuine and deeper needs in the community. God's Spirit, who initiated the mission of drawing communities around the Body of Christ, is still in the mission of effectively doing so among every tribe and nation, not the least among Hindus in South Asia.

# Church Planting in the Context of Animistic Cultures

*Gary Teja*

## DEFINITION

The word *animism* comes from the Latin word *anima*, which means “soul” or “breath.” E. B. Tylor, a British anthropologist, is credited with coining this term. It means “that which empowers or gives life to something.... a religion that sees the physical world as interpenetrated by spiritual forces — both personal and impersonal — to the extent that objects carry spiritual significance and events have spiritual causes.”<sup>1</sup>

Gailyn Van Rheenan puts it this way: 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 determine future action and, frequently, to manipulate their power.”<sup>2</sup>

Douglas Haywood gives a more comprehensive definition<sup>3</sup>:

1 Dean Halverson, *The Compact Guide to World Religions* (1996), p. 37.

2 Gailyn Van Rheenan, *Communicating Christ in Animistic Contexts* (1991), p. 20.

3 Douglas Haywood, “The Evangelization of Animists: Power, Truth or Love Encounters?” *International Journal of Frontier Missions* (1997), p. 155.

Animism is a belief in multiple spirit beings and souls that inhabit the universe, whose existence is found in people or in nature. As most generally conceptualized such spirits are semi-autonomous beings who represent distinct spheres of influence over nature (such as trees, water, animals, weather, etc.); or locations (such as mountains, depressions, forest glens, etc.); or human beings (that is by causing sickness, inducing possession behavior, evil behavior, or by becoming familial, helping entities, etc.).

Anthropologist/missiologist Eugene Nida describes animism as “believing in spirits, not only in the spirits of dead persons, but also in spirits which dwell in natural objects, such as trees, streams, mountains, a gnarled root, a perforated stone, or a meteorite.”<sup>4</sup>

Nida contrasts animism with those who practice an “organized” religion.<sup>5</sup> This is sometimes referred to as the difference between a *theistic* religion (in which there is a belief in a God or gods) and an *animistic* religion (in which there is a belief in spirits). Adherents of both “practice religion,” but the animist’s religion is “associated with magic, earthly spirits, living ancestors, witchcraft, curses, divination, and evil eye,”<sup>6</sup> as opposed to more highly *formalized* and organized religions like Christianity, Hinduism, Islam, and Buddhism, with their “abstract philosophical systems.”<sup>7</sup> Put differently, “Animism isn’t an organized religion with an institution (e.g. a synagogue, mosque, or church), it doesn’t contain articulated doctrine (e.g. a theology of God), and it doesn’t have sacred literature (e.g. the Hebrew Bible, the Quran, the New Testament).”<sup>8</sup>

What complicates this distinction is the fact that, according to anthropologist Paul Hiebert, 75% to 85% of those who practice a theistic religion (organized religion, a world religion) are practicing

4 Eugene Nida, *Customs and Culture: Anthropology for Christian Missions* (1954), p. 136.

5 Nida, *Customs and Culture*, p. 18.

6 Paul Hiebert, Daniel Shaw, and Tite Tiénou, *Understanding Folk Religion* (1999), p. 18.

7 Hiebert, Shaw, and Tiénou, *Understanding Folk Religion*, p. 18

8 “Animism,” Religion Facts (2015), <http://www.religionfacts.com/animism>. Accessed February 26, 2020.

a folk version of that religion<sup>9</sup> in which animism plays a key role.<sup>10</sup> For example, more credence may be given to the belief in spirits who can manipulate our lives than is given to a belief in a God or gods who are made known through a written document such as the Bible, the Torah, or the Upanishads. A syncretism takes place between a particular world religion's Scriptures and the actual practices lived out by those who are practitioners of that world religion.<sup>11</sup> Syncretism is defined as "the formation of new religious ideas from multiple distinct sources, often contradictory sources. All religions (as well as philosophies, systems of ethics, cultural norms, etc.) possess some level of syncretism because ideas do not exist in a vacuum."<sup>12</sup> It becomes a folk religion that "often consists of a mixture of formal and animistic beliefs — of high and low religion, or dual religion."<sup>13</sup> Animism is present in what we today call "New Age" religions as well as in the folk versions of the major world religions mentioned above.

## THE PREVALENCE OF ANIMISM IN OUR WORLD

As we have defined and described animism above, it becomes obvious that animism in its many manifestations is very prevalent around the world.

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9 A *folk religion* is a major world religion in which more emphasis is placed on superstition and practices that are not key to the religion itself, and are outside of the Scriptures of that religion. For example, in folk Christianity the crossing of fingers to make a cross to ward off evil is a folk practice; it is not found in the Bible. "Folk religion is any ethnic or cultural religious practice that falls outside the doctrine of organized religion. Grounded on popular beliefs and sometimes called *popular* or *vernacular religion*, the term refers to the way in which people experience and practice religion in their daily lives." (McKenzie Perkins, "What is Folk Religion? Definition and Examples," *Learn Religions* (2019), <https://www.learnreligions.com/folk-religion-4588370>. Accessed March 16, 2020.

10 Hiebert, Shaw, and Tiéno, *Understanding Folk Religion*, p. 18.

11 For an in-depth study, see Scott Moreau, "Religious Borrowing as a Two-Way Street: An Introduction to Animistic Tendencies in the Euro-North American Context," in *Christianity and the Religions* (1995).

12 [www.learnreligions.com/what-is-syncretism-p2-95858](https://www.learnreligions.com/what-is-syncretism-p2-95858)

13 Hiebert, Shaw, and Tiéno, *Understanding Folk Religion*, p. 77.



- It is found among those whom anthropologists used to refer to as “primitive peoples,” those without a formalized religion, but it also is found in technologically advanced societies.
- It is also found among those who practice a world religion such as those mentioned above yet syncretize that religion with animistic practices and beliefs.
- It is also practiced by those who seek an alternative to the world religions, like those engaged in the New Age movement.
- It is also present among those who seek good fortune through a lucky charm, like a baseball player who keeps a favorite bat because “it brings good luck” without any thought of God, or gods, or spirits.

## GOD IS TOO DISTANT

Dean Halverson explains that many people view God as distant and oftentimes abstract.<sup>14</sup> Human beings want to have contact with Someone or Something much more within our reach. While an individual may reject traditional Christianity that teaches a God who came in human form — the *Immanuel*: God with us of Matthew 1:23 — that person may feel drawn to popular modern-day forms of animism, because people desire to fill a void and personal spirit-beings seem more accessible to them than an abstract God.

What is the attraction of animism? For those who live in a scientific, empirical world, “Animism puts the mystery back into the secularized, matter-only world.”<sup>15</sup> It offers people a way to cope with their daily needs and problems that arise. Halverson points out such needs and problems as:

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14 In one African culture, there is a legend that God was at one time close to man, but that a woman cleaning her stoop in front of her hut accidentally poked God with her broom and God moved further away in the sky. This legend is understood as explaining why God, the Supreme Being, is so removed from humankind.

15 Halverson, *Compact Guide to World Religions*, p. 39.

- to be healed of an illness
- to be successful in a business endeavor
- to find a job
- to excel in school
- to restore a soured relationship
- to find a mate
- to gain guidance for the future.<sup>16</sup>

For those living within a less technological or empirical worldview, the problems faced may be an illness, a belief that one is cursed, or a desire to place a curse on someone else. The spirit world is seen as a force to be reckoned with. Power exists in these spirits and/or inanimate objects, and one needs to learn how to manipulate that power to accomplish one's desires. Blessings are sought. Talismans are worn. The spirits are invoked. Fetishes are placed around a village. All of these things are done to placate the spirits or to seek a spirit's help.

Among New Agers, animism is a way of finding meaning in an otherwise incomprehensible world where, if there is a God, He is too distant or unreachable. Solace can be found in crystals, sayings, or believing in the existence of a living, breathing Earth, among other beliefs.

Haywood explains that all people have certain common existential questions that they want answers to, questions which they hope their religious practice will answer:

- Can I find help in confronting the problems of living?
- Can I find healing in times of sickness?
- Can I find protection from malevolent beings?
- How can I discharge my obligations to supernatural beings who may interact with me and my world?
- How can I find meaning in life and in particular meaning to pain and suffering?

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16 Halverson, *Compact Guide to World Religions*, p. 39.

- What is the source or origin of evil?<sup>17</sup>

These are questions all religions, formal or otherwise, attempt to answer. In an animist cultural context, the animist finds answers through interacting with a spirit world.

## BASIC BELIEFS OF ANIMISTS

Since animism takes many different forms, it is not possible to describe the beliefs of all animists. Yet, we will attempt to bring about some understanding of what animists believe.

For most animists, there is a belief in the existence of the spirit world. Westerners often have a difficult time with this belief. We may believe in God and in organized religion, but the existence of a realm of spirits is unfathomable for many. Hiebert calls this the “Flaw of the Excluded Middle.” In his book *Anthropological Reflections on Missiological Issues*,<sup>18</sup> he explains how Westerners view the world — a two-tiered view of reality, with religion as one tier and science as the second one. (See the chart on page 219<sup>19</sup>).

Science dealt with the empirical world using mechanistic analogies, leaving religion to handle other-worldly matters, often in terms of organic analogies. Science was based on the certitudes of sense experience, experimentation and proof. Religion was left with faith in visions, dreams and inner feelings. Science sought order in natural laws. Religion was brought in to deal with miracles and exceptions to the natural order, but these decreased as scientific knowledge expanded.

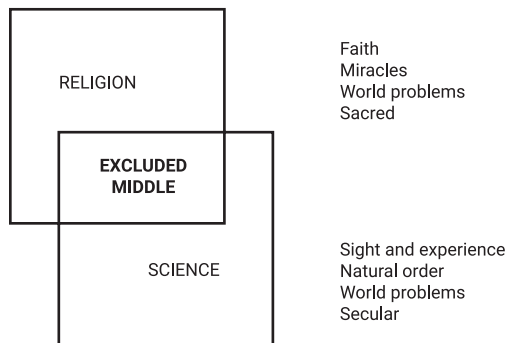
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17 Halverson, *Compact Guide to World Religions*, p. 39.

18 Paul Hiebert, *Anthropological Reflections on Missiological Issues* (1994).

19 *Ibid*, p. 418.

## FLAW OF THE EXCLUDED MIDDLE



Notice that between the two “realities” of religion and science lies a third, which Hiebert labeled the *excluded middle*. Between a belief in a transcendent God (in which faith is important and miracles occur) and a belief in a secular natural order governed by empirical realities lies a middle ground. It deals with the here and now. Philip Steyne writes of the person who lives in the excluded middle: “In the face of life’s demands, he is ultimately concerned with the who and why rather than the what and how.”<sup>20</sup> This middle ground deals with spirits and unseen powers that are part of human beings’ daily experience. This is the world described by an educated Navajo hospital administrator who said to me, “You white men have a difficult time in seeing the spirits, but we continually see them out of the corner of our eye.” It is the middle ground where non-Westerners<sup>21</sup> express that their child is sick because someone has given him the evil eye or has placed a curse on him. This is the place where mana (power) emanates from trees and rocks and other inanimate objects. Science cannot give an explanation that the animist is willing to accept, nor does the realm of religion necessarily give the answer. Yet, this is the realm in which the animist functions.<sup>22</sup> Like-

20 Philip Steyne, *Gods of Power: A Study of the Beliefs and Practices of Animists* (1992), p. 35.

21 I refer to non-Westerners here because animism is very prevalent in Africa and Asia. Nevertheless, as was mentioned earlier, there are New Agers who likewise are animistic — and they tend to be Westerners.

22 See chapter 2 of Jeff Stam’s *Straight Talk about Spiritual Warfare* (2016) for an in-depth study of two opposing worldviews and why it is so difficult for Westerners to

wise, the Westerner is unwilling to accept the world of the spirits, so we would appear to be at an impasse.

This excluded middle is the world of amulets and fetishes, of totems and “sayings.” It is where divination occurs and where what missiologists call “power encounters” are common.<sup>23</sup> It is a world where, as Philip Steyne writes, “Animism, as a total religious system, holds out the promise of success in the face of the difficulties, challenges and routine experiences of life. Animism works, and it encompasses all spheres of life from cradle to grave. Animism is not merely an attempt to respond to man’s fears. It delivers on its promises, providing a degree of success, security and happiness.”<sup>24</sup> The fact that it “works” is why so many people, even in the highly technological world, are attracted to animism or animistic practices — whether or not they would use that name for their beliefs.

Steyne goes on to explain animism in terms of holism, spiritualism, power, and community, elements that give it credence in the everyday world of humankind where religion deals with the “bigger questions” — the questions of origin, for example — and science deals with the empirical, what can be experimented and replicated.

### *Holism*

“The world interacts with itself. The sky, the spirits, the earth, the physical world, the living and the deceased all act, interact and react in consort. One works on the other and the one part can’t exist nor be explained without the other. The universe, the spirit world and man are all part of the same fabric. Each needs the other to activate it. The animist does not draw a line between the sacred and the profane, or the secular and the religious.... They are all knit together in a whole.”<sup>25</sup>

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accept the existence of the Excluded Middle, or of the realities of animism.

23 Steyne calls this a power-conscious system. *Gods of Power*, p. 38.

24 *Ibid.*, p. 57.

25 Steyne, *Gods of Power*, pp. 58-59.

### *Spiritualism*

“Spiritualism holds that spirituality is the very essence of life and that life is saturated with supernatural possibilities. Everything in life can be influenced by, and responds to, the world of spirits. Whatever happens in the physical realm has a spiritual coordinate, and likewise, whatever transpires in the spiritual realm has direct bearing on the physical world.... All of life is to be understood spiritually.”<sup>26</sup>

### *Power*

“Life’s essential quest is to secure power and use it. Not to have power or access to it produces great anxiety in the face of spirit caprice and the rigors of life. A life without power is not worth living.”<sup>27</sup> This power may be called *mana*, a life force, a dynamism. It may be procured by ritual manipulation in the form of sacrifices, charms, taboos, fetishes, ceremonies, witchcraft, and sorcery. It may come from an object. It may be transmitted from one person to another. It may emanate from a shrine. It could come from the clothing of a saint or guru.

Power is necessary because animists live with fear in their daily lives, although some are more cognizant of that fear than others. “The animist lives in fear of the spiritual powers.... [He] is overwhelmed by the many powers that might bring evil upon his life.... He desperately searches for information to ward off evil and manipulate the powers to do its bidding.”<sup>28</sup> It’s a matter of getting the cooperation of the spirit or god. “If one only knows the right formulae, the spirit world can be made to do one’s bidding, whether for good or for evil. The animist is not concerned about seeking the will of his god, but in compelling, entreating, or coercing his god to do his will.”<sup>29</sup> Haywood goes on to explain that “animists... often

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26 Steyne, *Gods of Power*, p. 59.

27 *Ibid.*, p. 60.

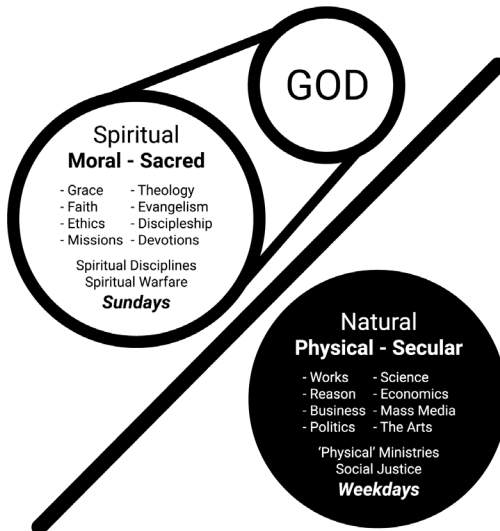
28 Van Rheenen, *Communicating Christ in Animistic Contexts*, pp. 21-22.

29 Nida, *Customs and Culture*, pp. 54-55.

explain the presence of evil as being due to the activity of spirits and from this perception develop concepts of character and nature that they ascribe to these spirits. As such they may identify a god/spirit or class of gods/spirits as being tricksters, or believe them to be capricious spirits, or malevolent and/or angry.”<sup>30</sup>

### Community

“Animistic man understands community holistically. He relates not only to people, but to almost everything else. In turn, the world affects him. He does not see himself as an individual but believes that his real life is in community with his fellows.”<sup>31</sup> This community also encompasses the dead ancestors. Taoism, for instance, has elements of ancestor worship as to certain village societies, either to venerate those who have died, to appease them, or to keep them at bay.<sup>32</sup>



30 Haywood, “The Evangelization of Animists,” p. 158.

31 Steyne, *Gods of Power*, p. 61.

32 For a simple description of ancestor worship and its application in various cultures, see Arthur Lehmann and James Myers, *Magic, Witchcraft, and Religion: An Anthropological Study of the Supernatural* (2001), pp. 18-19.

## BASIC PRACTICES IN ANIMISM<sup>33</sup>

### *Taboos and Prohibitions*

“Prohibitions are made to preserve the harmony between the spiritual world and physical world.”<sup>34</sup> Numerous taboos serve to protect society from wrong or evil<sup>35</sup>:

Taboos were introduced to regulate the moral order of the society. They took their origin from the fact that people discerned that there were certain things which were morally approved or disapproved by the deity. These were not contained in any written law but are preserved in tradition.... Within its historical context taboo was a sacred term for a set of cultic or religious prohibitions instituted by traditional religious authorities as instruments for moral motivation, guidance, and objectivity for protecting the sanctity of their shrines and the well-being of their worshipping communities.

In the movie *Hawaii* based on the book by James Michener of the same title, a New England missionary, upon landing in the Hawaiian islands, immediately runs toward a totem with the express purpose of knocking the “abomination” to the ground. He is tackled by a recently-graduated Hawaiian seminarian who says it is taboo to touch the figure. Animism is full of both taboos and prohibitions.

### *Sacred Places*

Animism’s sacred places may be trees, mountains, or man-made constructions. Mount Fuji in Japan is one such sacred place where the gods dwell, which explains why this iconic view is featured in

33 The eight basic practices outlined in this section all come from Chijioke Njoku, “The Role and Importance of Taboo in the Ibite Olo Land,” *Online Researchers* (2014), <https://caponic.blogspot.com/2014/08/the-role-and-importance-of-taboo-in.html>. Accessed February 27, 2020.

34 Patrick Zukeran, “The World of Animism – A Biblical Worldview Perspective,” *Probe for Answers* (2014). Accessed February 26, 2020.

35 Njoku, “The Role and Importance of Taboo in the Ibite Olo Land.”



so many books and brochures. Winfrid Boniface, a missionary to the Germanic tribes in 723, cut down an oak tree supposedly sacred to Thor. According to one source, sacred groves and sacred trees were venerated by the Germanic peoples and were destroyed by early Christian missionaries in an attempt to rid the country of animism and replace it with Christianity.

### *Sacred Things*

All animistic cultures have their sacred things. These may be crystals, carved images, totems, herbs, pollen bags, pipes, etc. These are used in performing certain rituals involving the gods, or they themselves may possess *mana* or power. In some cultures, there are house gods who are venerated; in others, there are representations of saints who are worshiped. As Tibetan Buddhism has come to North America it has brought with it the *mandala*, colorful designs that are made with sand, which have even found their way into some elite museums and art galleries. As beautiful as they may be, they are more than a cultural expression. According to the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, the mandala is “a symbolic diagram used in the performance of sacred rites and as an instrument of meditation. The mandala is basically a representation of the universe, *a consecrated area that serves as a receptacle for the gods and as a collection point of universal forces*” (italics added).<sup>36</sup> Indeed, the mandala is a “sacred thing,” and far from being neutral.

### *Sacred Actions*

Animistic religion’s sacred actions may involve the sacrifice of animals (roosters in *santería*, for example) or the use of pipes with hallucinogenic leaves that put a person into a trance. Omens also play a role in sacred actions. Saying “Bless you” when someone sneezes to prevent the entrance of evil spirits was originally a sacred action. There are calendrical rites — sacred actions conducted at specific

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<sup>36</sup> “Mandala.” *Encyclopaedia Britannica*. <https://www.britannica.com/topic/mandala-diagram>. Accessed February 27, 2020.

times of the year — connected with spirit worship. Even as we wake up each morning to a new day, the days of the week reflect an animism long gone. Here we will only show a few days of the week and their animistic or mythical origin:

- The word *Sunday* comes from the Old English word *sunnadaeg*, “day of the sun.” This commonplace word is reminiscent of pagan sun worship.
- *Monday* comes from the Old English *monandaeg* or “day of the moon.” The moon is prevalent in animistic practices (as we will see shortly as we discuss folk Catholicism).
- *Tuesday* comes from the Old English *tiwesdaeg*, which means “day of Tiw” (a Germanic god of war). The Latin *dies Marti* means “the day of Mars” (the god of war). In Spanish we call this day *martes*.

So even our calendar bears witness to early animism. Some say these names for the days of the week go as far back as Babylonia, also a pagan culture. Even if we only go back as far as the Romans, we see the linkage to mythology.

### *Sacred Words*

Sacred words usually are associated with animism. Muslims may repeat parts of the Quran for protection. Others have their mantras. Animists may repeat phrases, thinking that such repetition serves as a protection, while other phrases may serve to bless or curse another person. The Arabic word *bismillah* becomes a sacred word when spoken upon entering a dark room in order to keep the evil spirits away.

### *Sacred People*

In animist cultures certain people are considered sacred. Suffis worship “saints” and even their burial places are considered places of power and blessing. In folk Catholicism, we find those who make religious pilgrimages to shrines of our Lady of Guadalupe, Our Lady of Fatima, or to Santiago de Compostela, to receive a blessing and to do penance with the hope of having a sin forgiven by this act of contrition. Witch doctors also are considered sacred people. Even though villages may rely on them for many things, they are still often feared and ostracized when not needed. Witches are especially feared in many animistic cultures as individuals who can cast spells, curse a person, kill from a distance, or cause illness. In some cultures, including many indigenous tribes in the U.S. Southwest or parts of Africa, witches are said to even have the power to transform themselves into animals.

Shamans are considered good, unlike sorcerers or witchdoctors. They are considered to have the power (or the ability to call up the power) to bring about healing, using herbs and plants to effect bodily cures or to help improve crops, for example. Most shamans have apprentices with whom they share their botanical knowledge, which has kept shamanism alive in South America, Mexico, and other parts of the world as an adjunct to medical doctors. Unfortunately, shamanism can be combined with spirit worship and combined with Christian practices, again resulting in syncretism. All of these are animistic in their practices.

### *Rituals*

Some regular, sacred animist rituals may be performed by a priest while others are performed by the head of the family. They may require prayers, incantations, incense, smoke, or ritual gestures, all meant to call forth the spirits or to placate them.

### *Magic and Divination*

Magic and divination are animistic practices. See Acts 8:9-24; 13:8-11; 16:16-18; 19:19. Each of these passages deals with a power encounter, either with sorcerers who were called sons of the devil, or with a female slave who was possessed and told fortunes.

These are the basic practices found in animism. As you reflect on these eight practices, your mind may turn to stories you have heard of missionaries working in some of the most remote areas of the world where such practices are prevalent. Nevertheless, animists exist even in the most developed, urbanized societies. They may not dress like shamans from Southeast Asia or South America, and they may be more sophisticated than those whom you might naturally think of as animists, and they may reside in your own neighborhood. Aside from those who have brought their animistic practices with them as they immigrated to America or elsewhere, some of these animists are native to the culture. Those that practice what is currently known as New Age beliefs, those involved in Wicca, and some in the indigenous tribes in the U.S. are also practitioners of animism. Many of them see the interconnectedness of all living and non-living things. Many use inanimate objects to effect some kind of change. The presence of crystals, for example, is one such belief in *mana*. The Navajo use of sacred pollen is another. It is tied to the spirit world, a world of magic, astrological forces, ancestors, ghost spirits, and animal transformation.

### **OTHER ELEMENTS OR SYMBOLS OF ANIMISM**

We've looked at certain places, rituals, words, and other practices used in animism in many different forms. Now we will look at some very specific elements that are common in many different geographical regions of the world where animism is openly practiced.

## Evil Eye

The evil eye is a common animistic concept found among many different people groups. Regarding the Muslim belief in the evil eye, Bill Musk writes, “The fundamental concept of the evil eye is that precious persons or things are constantly vulnerable to hurt or destruction caused by other people’s envy.”<sup>37</sup> Musk further states that “Envy (*hasad*) for many Muslims “assumes the negative opposite of the positive force known as *Baraka*.”<sup>38</sup> While *baraka* is a blessing, envy is a curse.

Musk describes three kinds of evil eye:

- In Iran especially, the *salty eye* dynamic has a permanent effect on a person or object of envy. “A person with this kind of eye could stop tractors or topple buildings with a glance. Such a condition is incurable, and a person diagnosed as possessing a ‘salty eye’ is carefully guarded.”<sup>39</sup>
- The *bad eye* is seen as “a transitory condition.” It usually is understood as the unintentional casting of the eye. Charms and amulets may be used to ward off the bad eye.
- The *unclean eye* also is a passing condition. When a person is in an unclean state (such as not taking a bath after sexual intercourse), the person will have an unclean eye. If a person who is sick or infirm is looked upon with an unclean eye, death can occur. Otherwise, the recitation of an incantation or other curative ceremonies would/could heal the person.

## Divination

Divination, as mentioned above, is another form of animism. Divination is the seeking of knowledge about the future, or seeking to

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37 Bill Musk, *The Hidden Face of Islam* (2003), p. 23.

38 *Ibid*, p. 23.

39 *Ibid*, p. 23.

learn who is responsible for calamities that rain down on individuals, like illness, death, financial crisis, or crop failure.<sup>40</sup> We list a few forms of divination below.

|                       |  |
|-----------------------|--|
| <i>AEROMANCY</i>      | Observing the ripples in water               |
| <i>ALECTRYOMANCY</i>  | Observing roosters in a circle               |
| <i>ANGANG</i>         | Seeing a person or animal on a journey       |
| <i>ASTRAGALOMANCY</i> | Casting bones to see where they fall         |
| <i>AUGURY</i>         | Watching the flight of birds                 |
| <i>BENGE</i>          | Giving poison to chickens to see if they die |
| <i>BOTANOMANCY</i>    | Watching how leaves fall                     |
| <i>GEOMANCY</i>       | Reading cracks in dried mud                  |
| <i>HARUSPICATION</i>  | Reading the entrails of sacrificed animals   |
| <i>KLEROMANCY</i>     | Casting lots                                 |
| <i>LITHOMANCY</i>     | Reading rock formations                      |
| <i>NECROMANCY</i>     | Communicating with the dead                  |
| <i>NUMEROLOGY</i>     | Observing combinations of numbers            |
| <i>OLEOMANCY</i>      | Reading pebbles thrown on the sand           |
| <i>ONEIROMANCY</i>    | Interpreting dreams                          |
| <i>PALMISTRY</i>      | Reading the lines in a person's hand         |

As you analyze the list, you will probably think of both Westerners and non-Westerners for whom several of these forms of divination apply. Even in major cities in the Western Hemisphere you will find those who read tarot cards, tell fortunes, or claim to be psychics. In parts of Latin America and in Europe, some television stations are dedicated to the occult, in which fortune telling and divination, sorcery and magic, are clear animistic practices.<sup>41</sup> Geographical location differs widely, but they all have one thing in common: they are animistic in their origin. Séances conducted to communicate with the dead are less common than in the past, but

40 For examples of diviners in Africa, see Lehmann and Myers, *Magic, Witchcraft, and Religion*, pp. 277-280.

41 Divination and sorcery were prohibited in the Bible: Exodus 22:18; Leviticus 19:33, 20:6, 27; Deuteronomy 18:10-11; 1 Samuel 28:3; Jeremiah 27:9-10.

some still take place. Some adolescents play with Ouija boards not knowing their occult origin. Also called a “spirit board” or “talking board,” the Ouija, according to some sources, was first used in China in 1100 A.D. “Spiritualists believed that the dead were able to contact the living and reportedly used a talking board very similar to a modern Ouija board at their camps in Ohio in 1886 to ostensibly enable faster communication with spirits.”<sup>42</sup> *Catholic Answers*, a Roman Catholic Christian apologetics organization, calls the Ouija board “far from harmless, as it is a form of divination (seeking information from supernatural sources).”<sup>43</sup>

### *New Age*

*Gaia* is an expression of the New Age movement. Gaia is the personification of a living, pulsating Earth. Whether personal or impersonal, the Earth is considered to be animate, alive. Many South Americans still practice the blessing of a new home by pouring a libation on the floor in tribute to Mama Pacha (Mother Earth or World Mother, oftentimes written as Pachamama). It becomes syncretism as practicing Christians continue these pre-Christian rituals.

New Age tends to be pantheistic. Those who do not accept a God of creation tend to worship the creation instead. Mikhail Gorbachev, the final head of state of the U.S.S.R., was one such practitioner. He once wrote, “All of us are linked to the cosmos. Look at the sun. If there were no sun, then we cannot exist. So, nature is my god. To me, nature is sacred. Trees are my temples and forests are my cathedrals.”<sup>44</sup>

Likewise, the “getting back to nature” New Agers seem to have borrowed from Native American religions in North America (as had Eastern pantheists), identifying with nature, participating in sweat

42 “Ouija,” Wikipedia, <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ouija>. Accessed February 27, 2020.

43 “Are Ouija Boards Harmless?” *Catholic Answers*, <https://www.catholic.com/qa/are-ouija-boards-harmless>. Accessed February 27, 2020.

44 Mikhail Gorbachev, *Goodreads*, Inc., <https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/482788-i-believe-in-the-cosmos-all-of-us-are-linked>. Accessed March 1, 2020.

lodges, and using peyote or other hallucinogenic drugs to enter into a trance and commune with the spirits.

New Age has its mercenaries who have found ways of commercializing on people's beliefs and/or naiveté. New Age products that you can find in esoteric shops in cities where New Age practice is prevalent include incense, essential oils, glass pyramids, tarot boxes, wind chimes, magnetic therapy, Zodiac pendants, astrological jewelry, crystals and minerals, crystal balls, tarot cards, healing wands, goddess statues, and yoga mats, among others. Not all of these items are exclusively New Age but one must be aware and careful regarding the origin of these products and the meaning behind them.

### *Syncretism*

As we said before, animistic practices tend to be syncretistic, blending Christian ritual with pagan ritual (except in remote areas of the world where cultures have not yet met). One case in point is found in the movie *The Healer*, which was released some 40 years ago by a Catholic order. A priest in a village in South America wanders the market, looking at the produce and herbs for sale. He begins to ask questions and finds out that many of these items are used in shamanistic rituals. He befriends the local shaman and "apprentices" himself to this man. He wants to learn everything he can about shamanism. He then attends a funeral in which the shaman is present. The priest states that the dead girl is now an angel in heaven. The father of the girl says she will intercede with God for a tractor to help the family survive. Here we see how Christian beliefs can be mixed with superstitions or false beliefs. Humans, for example, do not become angels. Angels are different from humans. Likewise, dead people cannot intercede for us, especially for mundane things. This is a false hope based on a syncretistic approach to religion — in this case, Christianity.



Hiebert's descriptions of folk religions are good examples of syncretism in animistic cultures, found in folk Catholicism, folk Islam, and so forth. Buddhist practices have also crept into Christianity. "Christian yoga" has become a fad, for one, and in the 1970s, many Christians became infatuated with transcendental meditation™ and also sang along with the lyrics in George Harrison's "My Sweet Lord" which repeated the Hindu phrase "Hare Krishna." Yes, these are examples of syncretism, and for the most part they are animistic at the same time.

Nevertheless, not all animism comes in contact with other religions, and therefore do not become syncretistic in practice. Some other interesting holdovers of Christian syncretism are:

- The word Easter for the celebration of the Resurrection paired with usages of bunnies and eggs.
- The usage of evergreens, berries and other rule related things around Christmas.
- The evolution of Halloween.
- Some of the usages of the claiming things "in the Name of Jesus" in more a ritualistic or "name it and claim it" kind of way.
- There are Christian traditions that sometimes use the Name of Jesus as a Talisman of sorts.

## PERSONAL OBSERVATIONS

In the course of my ministry as a missionary or a professor, I have had personal encounters with animism and conversations with those who have more experience in this area. Here are a few examples.

## Ghana

About an hour and a half drive from Accra, Ghana, is the village of Big Adda. The Presbyterians have several church plants along this route. When we reached Big Adda, we took a motorized dugout upriver to a village where a new church plant had been started by a young woman named Christiana Sikayo. We worshipped under a thatch-roofed building with no walls, and then took a stroll through the village. Christiana guided us so that we would not step on fetishes that were lying on the ground. As foreigners we never would have known that these were fetishes had she not pointed this out to us. The gospel is very new to this village, and most of the villagers live in fear of spirits to whom they must pay homage.

In another instance, Rev. Ahmed Kenneth Q., superintendent of the Free Methodist Churches of Ghana, once told me about a place in Ghana, Kpwechupkanya, where babies were sacrificed to a giant snake to appease the river god or spirit.

## Navajos

Years ago when I was working for my denomination in the U.S., I became friends with several leaders within the Navajo tribe, a major indigenous group in the southwest of the United States.

I learned that the early white missionaries violated a Navajo taboo by putting black shingles on the roofs of their church buildings. Worse yet, they allowed dead bodies to enter the church building for funerals, thus contaminating the building and making it unclean for Navajos to enter. If a person died in his *Hogan*, or round house, the house would have a hole broken into a side for the spirit to escape and the Hogan could never be occupied again; often they were burned to the ground. The door of a Hogan should face east to welcome the rising sun each morning.

Traditional Navajos would have a bag of pollen and would greet the sun each morning with a chant. Each Navajo belonged to a clan, whose name is often associated with an animal, further tying the Navajo to the earth and nature. Navajos have many ceremonies connected with nature and different blessing ceremonies as well as cleansing ceremonies.

### *“The Gods Must Be Crazy”*

This is a favorite movie of mine that I showed every year to my cultural anthropology students when I was a professor. Released in 1980, the movie is based in Botswana around a small nomadic tribe in the Kalahari Desert<sup>45</sup>.

One day, a glass Coca-Cola bottle is carelessly thrown out of an airplane by a pilot and falls to Earth unbroken. Initially, Xi's people assume this strange artifact is a 'present' from the gods just as they believe plants and animals are and find many uses for it. Unlike other bounties, however, there is only one glass bottle, which causes unforeseen conflict within the tribe. Consequently, Xi confers with elders and agrees to make a pilgrimage to the edge of the world and dispose of the supposedly cursed thing.

In the movie there is a scene where Xi shoots an antelope with an arrow, then approaches it and speaks to it, thanking it for its willingness to die so that he might have food. This shows the interaction of animists with nature.

### *Mexico*

In Mexico, the basilica to the Virgin of Guadalupe was built on the ruins of the ancient temple to the mother goddess, Tonatzin (“Our Lady”). She was identified with the moon. Accommodation took place in which the Catholic church encouraged worship at this site,

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45 “The Gods Must Be Crazy.” Wikipedia [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The\\_Gods\\_Must\\_Be\\_Crazy](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Gods_Must_Be_Crazy). Accessed February 26, 2020.

calling Mary “Our Lady of Guadalupe,” “Mother of God.” Like Tonatzin, she is standing on a half moon. Mexico has its share of shamans and healers who combine Christian elements with pre-Christian elements.<sup>46</sup>

### *The Virgin Mary in Vermont*

An episode concerning the Virgin Mary comes from my childhood in Vermont. A neighbor of my cousin came from a Roman Catholic family. Visiting her one day, I noticed a small statue of the Virgin lying on the floor of the woodshed. I picked it up and placed it on a table, dusting it off. The neighbor girl took it and threw it back on the floor. She said the Virgin had not answered one of her prayers, so she was punishing her. She also mentioned that sometimes as punishment she would put the statue upside down in a glass of water. This was in the late '50s in the U.S.!

### *Uganda*

Dr. Jeff Stam, founder of Set Free Ministries, comments, “Today, in Uganda, child sacrifice is on the increase and is a significant national problem, both in the villages and by major, wealthy businessmen wishing for success.”<sup>47</sup>

### *Guatemala*

In Chichicastenango, Guatemala, we witnessed pre-Christian rituals enacted on the steps leading up to the front door of a church and other rituals being performed inside the building as well. There were many rituals being performed that had nothing to do with Christianity and spoke of pre-Christian time. Some had shamanistic origins. Again, syncretism has occurred, distorting the truth of the gospel.

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46 More on folk Catholicism will be found in the chapter written by Xoán Castro and Dr. Daniel Sánchez.

47 In a conversation with the author, Dr. Stam made reference to the series of articles “Child Sacrifice in Uganda” accessible at the Pulitzer Center website, <https://pulitzercenter.org/projects/africa/child-sacrifice-uganda>. Accessed March 24, 2020.

Driving around Guatemala, you may come across fields where Mayan farmers have placed a cross at each of the cardinal points of the compass, representing the *chaac*, the god of rain and thunder. Unlike other rain gods from around the world, this rain god dwells within the earth and not in the sky. He dwells where the sacred water flows out of the *cenotes*, or sinkholes, and also out of underground caves. He is believed to be responsible for bringing maize to the Mayans.

Professor Theresa Renkema and I would take Kuyper College students on a two-week field experience in Guatemala. One of the places we would visit was Panajachel on the shores of Lake Atitlán. We would take a boat across the lake to the village of Santiago, where Don Maximón, an effigy of a Mayan deity and folk saint, “held court.” He was known for heavy drinking and cigar smoking. When we visited the home where he was presently residing, he had a cigar in his mouth and liquor bottles placed in front of him. According to a *National Geographic* website,

Today, Maximón’s effigy resides in a different family’s home every year — his wooden body is dressed in a typical male suit of the region and placed on a petate, or straw mat. Traditionally he was only brought out during Holy Week, but because of high demand from pilgrims, tourists, and brujos (shamans), he is on display year-round. Those seeking miracles, good health, and love make offerings at his shrine in exchange for his favor — moonshine, hand-rolled cigarettes, and money are his vices of choice. His cofrades, or attendants, spend their days smoking and drinking by his side, and it is considered the highest honor to host him. He is brought out during Holy Week and paraded through the streets before being placed in a different home for the following year.<sup>48</sup>

48 Gulnaz Khan, “Meet Maximón: The Liquor-Drinking, Chain-Smoking Saint,” *National Geographic* (2018), <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/travel/destinations/north-america/guatemala/maximon-santiago-atitlan-maya-saint/>. Accessed February 26, 2020.

There seemed to be a heaviness in the air. Students commented afterwards that a feeling of oppression came over them as they viewed this effigy and the veneration given it by the villagers who were crowded into the room. Only upon leaving the hut did the oppression seem to dissipate.

Syncretism also occurred inside the Roman Catholic church in Santiago de Atitlán. The sacred altar is a mixture of Christian icons and pagan icons.<sup>49</sup>

### *African Traditional Religions*

In African Traditional Religions (ATR), we also see a mixing of Christian and African pagan rituals in which visitors with an un-discerning eye may have no idea what they are experiencing., Multiplication Network's West Africa leader Rev. Mike Okuneye, a Nigerian, shared some information on the prevalence of animism in his country. In the Yoruba-speaking southwest part of Nigeria, men who were later deified are said to be endowed with power: Olodumare (the supreme God), who has *ase* (authority), the spark of life or breath of life; Orumila (custodian of knowledge), who gives knowledge to the *ifa* oracle, to priests, and to native doctors; Ogun (God of iron); Iyemoja (goddess of the sea, giver of children, and protector of women); Shango (god of thunder and warriors, god of fire).

In the northeast side of Nigeria there are other gods and animistic practices. The most prevalent practice is *bori*, a Hausa word which means "the spirit that resides in physical things." In *bori*, people can sometimes be possessed by the spirits and reveal things and heal the sick. These spirits inhabit rivers, the woods, mountains, and entire forests. The spirits are both male and female and can be invoked by music and dance. There are also tribes that worship tigers, lions, leopards, cheetahs, monkeys, and other animals in their midst. It is

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49 Adam Rubel, "Syncretism in the Maya Culture," *Saq' Be' Organization for Mayan and Indigenous Spiritual Studies* (2015). <http://sacredroad.org/syncretism-in-the-maya-culture/>. Accessed February 28, 2020. For more on syncretism among Christians, see Van Rheenan (1991), Chapter 5 for an in-depth study.

believed that these spirits inhabit the animals in order to protect the people from invasion. Some people allegedly are able to metamorphose into animals.

The south and southeast of Nigeria share a unique form of animism. The majority of Igbos live there and other tribes who also believe in a supreme being who goes by the name of Chukwu, "creator of all things." Since he cannot be reached, other spirits act on his behalf as intermediaries. One of these is Amadioha, the god of thunder. Human sacrifices and other offerings are needed in this area. There is even a worship of mermaids and other water spirits in this part of Nigeria. Most families have a family shrine. There is a village called Nnewi which means "bush rat is our Mother." The Ewi, or bush rat, saved the people during wars. To this day it is taboo to eat a bush rat.

Unfortunately, given the amount of animism that still pervades, it is no wonder that some of it has infiltrated into the church, creating a syncretism that is difficult to exterminate. Even as divinations are performed, the diviner will often add the name "Jesus" to give it a Scriptural basis. Almost everything is attributed to the machinations of the spirits, so no one takes responsibility for his own actions. There is a strong fatalism. The minister and higher leaders of the church in Nigeria have become viewed as transitional intermediaries and are revered as lesser gods, either consciously or unconsciously, by some.

## *Haiti*

In Haiti, *voudun* (voodoo) ceremonies were performed outside our hotel one night. Voudun has Christian and pagan elements, a blending of Christianity and African rituals, similar to what you just read about Nigeria. The same holds true for the Spanish version of voudun, *santería*. The spirits have the names of saints and some of the rituals remind one of Christian rituals.

One might think that voodoo had its origins in Haiti, but it originated in francophone Benin in West Africa. Also worth mentioning, a similar phenomenon emerged in the southern states of America called *hoodoo*. Again, a blending of acts to help the practitioner gain power over things. It is strongly connected to syncretism, and has found its way into the practices of wiccan and naturalistic practices as well in the United States.

### *Dominican Republic*

In the Dominican Republic we attended a seven-hour worship service out in a *batey* which included going down to the river for mass baptisms. After we left, the celebration continued. One missionary said to me, “Things take a turn now that we are gone. Some of the practices from this point on are far from Christian in their origin.” Hiebert talks about a similar experience when he mentions how a missionary in Ghana rejected all of the cultural practices of the Ghanaians. As a result, the practitioners went underground. “Young converts knew they dare not tell the missionary about the old ways.... So these ways became part of the new Christian’s hidden culture. Christian marriage ceremonies were held in the church, and then the people returned to their homes to celebrate the wedding in traditional ways in private. Amulets were hidden under shirts.... The people continued to practice their old ways, but did so in secret.... They added Christianity as a new layer of beliefs on top of the old. The result was a two-tiered Christianity. In the long run, this uneasy coexistence of public Christianity and private ‘paganism’ led to syncretism.”<sup>50</sup>

### *Summary*

As we have seen in all of these examples, animists are described as “a people who do not have the full light of God’s revelation and as a consequence suffer from spiritual ignorance and even Satanic delusions.”<sup>51</sup>

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50 Hiebert, *Anthropological Reflections*, p. 19.

51 Haywood, *Evangelization of Animists*, p. 156.



All of this speaks to man's separation from God and a desire to find something worth living for. And it is into this kind of world that the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob sent His Son to be the bridge to the unfathomable, to be "the Word made flesh" (John 1). Jeremiah speaks of those who turn to idols made of wood and stone, so prevalent in animism, when he writes, "They say to wood, 'You are my father,' and to stone, 'You gave me birth.' They have turned their backs to me and not their faces" (Jeremiah 2:27).

Lest we despair, we need to recognize that it is possible to bring animists to the feet of Jesus. In spite of their fears, the overwhelming sense of hopelessness that many animists feel — the bridge from darkness to light— is not insurmountable. There are best practices that can help us to walk across the bridge together.

## BEST PRACTICES

We have covered a lot of information about animism and animists. We have noticed that some animist traditions are from various cultural contexts such as Africa, Asia and remote regions of Latin America. We have also made mention of animist practices in more familiar settings, including those of the New Age Movements in the US. We recognized how Christianity and pagan or neo-pagan practices become blended in syncretistic practices. The question remains: What are the best practices for reaching these practitioners with the gospel, the good news of salvation in Jesus Christ?

Several sources have been helpful to us in enumerating ways of reaching out to animists of any type. Halverson and the website [www.probe.org](http://www.probe.org) are two sources upon which we have heavily relied.

Halverson gives us a list of ten things to do. Let's take a look.<sup>52</sup>

1. *Be sensitive to the animist's perspective.* It is easy for Westerners, in particular, to discount animists' concerns or to scoff at their

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52 Halverson, *Compact Guide to World Religions*, pp. 43-53.

perceptions of the spirit world and its effects on their lives. That world is real to an animist — and if we apply Hiebert, it should be real to us as well. Paul tells us in Ephesians 6:12, “For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms.” Such spiritual forces do exist, whether we are aware of them or not.

2. *Be aware of the influence of secularistic thinking in our lives.* Those of us with secularistic worldviews often consider the spirit world improbable. “We as Western Christians, need to be aware of how naturalistic, empirical thinking has influenced our worldview to the extent that we have dismissed the influence of the spirit world altogether.”<sup>53</sup>
3. *Find common ground.* The first thing we need to declare is our common belief in the existence of the supernatural. We may be at the opposite end of the continuum with animists, but we both believe in the supernatural. We also both believe that the supernatural can be offended, and that this carries consequences, and so we seek to find an escape from the consequences. Remember, too, that many animists believe not just in the supernatural but also, like Christians, in a Supreme Being. Halverson gives a list of questions that can be asked in order to understand how a particular animist perceives this Supreme Being.<sup>54</sup>

In Isaiah 43:10-12 we read:

“You are my witnesses,” declares the Lord, “and my servant whom I have chosen, so that you may know and believe and understand that I am he. Before me no god was formed, nor will there be one after me. I, even I, am the Lord, and apart from me there is no savior. I have revealed and saved and proclaimed — I, and not some foreign god among you. You are my witnesses,” declares the Lord, “that I am God.”

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53 Halverson, *Compact Guide to World Religions*, pp. 43-44.

54 *Ibid*, pp. 45.

4. *Highlight the differences.* Most animists regard God as distant and silent, unreachable and unfathomable. The Christian God, however, has revealed himself in His Son, Jesus, the *Immanuel* (*God with us*). He came down into history and took on human form. John 1:1, 14, and 18 point to God being very present—not distant and unknowable.

Animists seek to appease the gods or spirits, but Christ has paid the price. The offense and the condemnation have been removed. Texts that can be shared include Isaiah 53:6; 2 Corinthians 5:21; Hebrews 4:16; and Hebrews 9:25-26.

5. *Model trust in God alone.* It is difficult for an animist to put his trust in just one deity. Trust in a god and in other spirits is common. This is often seen among those who practice a folk religion. Even Christians may trust in God but then turn to spirits for assistance, or to charms and amulets, or to the Virgin Mary or to a saint. Bible passages that can help to show the power of trusting only in God include Matthew 10:29-30 and 1 Peter 5:7.
6. *Be ready for God to work in mighty ways.* God is a God of power. Romans 8:37-39 tells us that we are more than conquerors through “him who loves us,” that there is nothing that can separate us from God if we put our trust in Him. Paul uses the word convinced —“ I am convinced.” There is no doubt, no need to hedge our bets as some would do by putting trust in charms or idols. We can trust in Christ and Him alone. “For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.” It is this God who will act in powerful ways, demonstrating His power over spirits, over the devil himself in whatever form the animist envisions him.

Halverson points out that as demons are driven out, as God flexes His muscles against Satan, it is a sign of the coming of the Kingdom (Matthew 12:28).<sup>55</sup> There will be power encounters and there will be truth encounters demonstrating the coming of the Kingdom.

7. *Turn their hearts toward desiring a relationship with God.* Our God is not distant. God is present in our everyday affairs. Most animists turn to spirits because they feel God, the Supreme Being, is too far removed to care about us. They believe that intermediaries will respond to their needs and concerns. Yet the God of the Bible is ever-present. Matthew 6:28-33 is one text that demonstrates this care which God has for us humans. Look closely at v. 32: “For the pagans run after all these things, *and your heavenly Father knows that you need them*” (italics added).
8. *Address their fears.* The animist’s fears are real. Fear encompasses his world. This is the reason he seeks out ways to appease the spirits, to find the cause of his suffering or why his crops have failed. This is why he reads his daily horoscope in the newspaper before venturing out, or why he consults with the palm reader.

Recognizing that this fear is genuine, we need to show that God is greater. Colossians 2:15 tells us that through His sacrificial death on the cross, Jesus “disarmed the powers and authorities.” Not only this, “[H]e made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross.”

This fear is cast out through trust in Jesus. “There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear” (1 John 4:18). Unlike animists, we are not fearful about approaching the supernatural. Because of the sacrificial death of Jesus, our great high priest, we are told, “Let us then approach God’s throne of grace with confidence” (Hebrews 4:16). God is knowable. God is approachable

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55 Halverson, *Compact Guide to World Religions*, pp. 47.

through Jesus Christ. Jesus is the “go-between.” 1 Timothy 2:5 tells us, “For there is one God [a truth the animist needs to learn], and one mediator between God and mankind, the man Christ Jesus.” See also three verses in Hebrews: 8:6, 9:15, and 12:24.

9. *Be clear about who Christ is and who we are in Him.* Much of what appears just above about addressing animists’ fears applies here, too. God is the creator of all things (John 1:1). The Colossians needed to learn this lesson, and in his epistle to them, Paul wrote: “For in him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things have been created through him and for him” (Colossians 1:16).

John makes the same point in his gospel: “Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made” (John 1:3). It is important for the animist to see Jesus as more than a performer of miracles, more than a person of power. Jesus also is the very Creator of the universe which He inhabits. And as the Creator, there is nothing more powerful than He.

Jesus even has power over the very demons and spirits that the animist fears. It is ironic that as the animist fears the demons, the Bible tells us that the demons fear Jesus! Mark relates the story of Jesus casting out an impure spirit. The spirit says to Jesus, “What do you want with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are — the Holy One of God” (Mark 1:23-24). Jesus demonstrates His power over this demon when He commands, “Be quiet!...Come out of him!” (v. 25). Mark goes on, “The impure spirit shook the man violently and came out of him with a shriek” (v. 26). But this is not the only demonstration of Jesus’ power over demons. Take the case of the demon-possessed man in the region of the Gerasenes (Mark 5). The gospels are full of references to demon-possessed people whom Jesus healed (e.g. Matthew 4:24; 8:16; 8:28; 9:32).

10. *Point out the deceptive nature of the spirits.* Animism is nothing less than devil worship. Some sorcerers or shamans may speak of good spirits and bad spirits, but all of them originate from the realm of darkness. Lucifer, the prince of this world, is also the god of this age (2 Corinthians 4:4). Jesus, in rebuking those who reject Him, calls them offspring of the devil. “You belong to your father, the devil.... He was a murderer from the beginning, not holding to the truth, for there is no truth in him” (John 8:44). In the very first book of the Bible, we see Satan as a liar (Genesis 3:5).

According to the Scriptures, those who align themselves with the devil or evil spirits, those who do animistic practice, are lost souls who will pay a price. This goes back to the early days of creation. See Deuteronomy 18:10-12: “Let no one be found among you who sacrifices their son or daughter in the fire, who practices divination, or sorcery, interprets omens, engages in witchcraft, or casts spells, or who is a medium or spiritist, or consults the dead. Anyone who does these things is detestable to the Lord....”

As we plant churches among animists, we need to do so with love. We need to develop loving and trusting relationships that will be a testimony to the gospel and to the truth of the Jesus we proclaim. Our approach cannot be hostile and antagonistic. We must care for each person as an individual created in God’s image and worthy of hearing the Good News.

## CONCLUSION

We have taken a journey into the realm of animism. We have seen how animism is practiced in both Western and non-Western contexts. We have seen how animism reflects humans’ desire to control our surroundings, either to appease the spirits or to manipulate them for our own good and/or to disadvantage others. We have

recognized that animism is universal, that it is found in all parts of the world, among many different cultures.

Animism takes many different forms, but the one common idea is that this practice is a lack of knowledge of the one true God who created all things and who continues to be present and active in the affairs of this world. It is only through Jesus the *Immanuel* that we can know this God who cares for us so much that He willingly gave us the Son to be an offering on our behalf. It is the act of this Son and our relationship to Him that takes away these primeval fears, giving us peace of mind and soul and the hope of an eternity with the Son. This is Good News. This Good News needs to be shared with those who still “walk in darkness,” in the darkness of animism, “so that they might walk with hope into His wonderful light” (1 Peter 2:9).

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. How do you personally define the word animism?
2. What is the difference between an animistic religion and a formalized religion?
3. Explain what Hiebert meant by “the flaw of the excluded middle.”
4. Name several examples of how practitioners of a formalized (or world) religion can also be animistic.
5. Steyne explained animism in terms of holism, spiritualism, power, and community. How does our living out the gospel fulfill these four needs?
6. Eight basic practices of animism are listed. Do you see Christians unknowingly practicing any of these eight aspects of animism?

7. In a few words, differentiate between the animistic and biblical worldviews.
8. How can you present the God of the Bible to a person who practices animism? What is attractive about our God for those caught in animistic practices?
9. How do we present Jesus Christ in such a way that fills this abstract void people naturally have?

### PERSONAL NOTES

*Please use this space for writing your own reflection or a prayer regarding the content of this chapter.*

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# Church Planting in the Contexts of Shame/Honor and Fear/Power Cultures

*Gary Teja*

## INTRODUCTION

**Scenario 1:** Daoud breaks into a store, where he is caught by the local police. He is placed in jail until his trial. At his trial there is sufficient evidence to find him guilty of theft. According to the law, he must spend the next two years in prison for his crime.

**Scenario 2:** Daoud feels ashamed for the fact that he was caught and the dishonor that he has brought upon his family and his village by his actions. Do what he may, Daoud has not found a way to restore honor to his family and to himself. Until he does, he will continue to feel like an outsider, and will be ostracized by his family and neighbors.

**Scenario 3:** Daoud walks home late one night from work. He has to walk by a cemetery. As he nears the cemetery, he feels chills going up and down his back. He calls out “Bismillah” before hurrying past the cemetery and entering his home, where he recites several verses of the Quran while fingering his prayer beads.

Each of these three scenarios represents a particular *worldview*. Worldview has been defined in many different ways. One definition calls worldview a way of seeing and interpreting one's cultural and religious context. Another definition labels it as the overall perspective from which one sees and interprets the world. It is a collection of beliefs about life and the universe held by an individual or a group. Worldview has also been described as a thought system developed in order to explain the world and our experiences in it.

Some describe worldview as different colored lenses through which we view our reality. No two people see the world exactly alike, but people who grow up in a particular culture share elements of life that become part of their reality. Common customs, beliefs, likes, and dislikes can become part and parcel of what we call a worldview. Since a person grows up in a particular cultural context, he is often unaware that he holds to a particular worldview and may not even understand what the elements of that worldview are.

In their book *Teaching Cross-Culturally*, Judith and Sherwood Lingenfelter declare: "All of us are prisoners to our culture."<sup>1</sup> Our particular culture — our worldview — shapes us. Our behaviors are based on that worldview.

This often causes us confusion when we interact with people of a different worldview. "We assume that others will do things our way, and we interpret their behavior in accord with our own values and understanding. As a consequence, we are blind to cultural differences and do not even think to question why people act or think differently than we do," Duane Elmer writes. "Entering another culture is about encountering differences, every day, all day."<sup>2</sup>

In this chapter we want to look more closely at those "differences." We will do this by naming three different worldviews. These worldviews permeate world religions to one extent or another. If we

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1 Judith Lingenfelter and Sherwood Lingenfelter, *Teaching Cross-Culturally* (2003), p. 20.

2 Duane Elmer, *Cross-Cultural Connections* (2002), p. 29.

are to reach out to a religious Muslim or a practicing Buddhist, for example, we need to understand how that person thinks. Their predominant worldview influences their religious beliefs and practices — and it may be in conflict with our own.<sup>3</sup> If we seek to transmit the good news of Jesus Christ, we must do so in the thought patterns of our listeners. This is what anthropologists and missiologists call contextualization. Without going into a lengthy discussion of *contextualization*, we will define it simply as presenting the gospel in the context — the reality — of our listeners in terms that make sense to them. In Multiplication Network’s material on stronger (healthy) churches, we call this “text in context.” It means recognizing those differences referred to above and using those differences to transmit the eternal, unchanging gospel into that different context. Todd Benkert explains it this way<sup>4</sup>:

The task of taking the gospel to the world involves communicating the gospel to people of different cultures. The task of proclaiming and living out the gospel in a particular setting requires a process called contextualization.... Contextualization helps us to share the gospel in ways that most effectively communicate the good news in a particular culture and to help new believers practice their Christian faith in ways that both transform and make sense within that culture.

Contextualization can be a controversial subject because, according to John Wagenveld and Tim Koster, we can overadapt or underadapt. They write<sup>5</sup>:

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3 The form of the gospel espoused by us or others is also bound and steeped in a cultural context. Some of that context may not necessarily be biblical and may also need to be examined. It is important to understand that we do not ourselves espouse a culturally neutral or culturally original form of the gospel. Each of us sees reality through our cultural lenses.

4 Todd Benkert et al., “Contextualization Issues,” in *Planting Healthy Churches* (2015), pp. 270-271.

5 Tim Koster and John Wagenveld, *Take Your Church’s Pulse* (2014), p. 88.

When we contextualize, we walk a fine line between overadapting to the culture or underadapting to it. If we overadapt, the gospel begins to get watered down and we fail to issue the challenges that need to be confronted in order for people to really wrestle with what it means to embrace and follow Christ. If we underadapt, people will simply turn away because, while they are hearing biblical truth, they are being given answers to questions they aren't asking in concepts that make no sense to them and with arguments that carry no weight in their world.

Overadapting can end in what we call *syncretism*. Syncretism can be defined as “the combination of different forms of beliefs or practices.”<sup>6</sup> In describing the effect of syncretism when it comes to the Good News, Paul Hiebert, Daniel Shaw, and Tite Tiénou write that this becomes “the mixing of different beliefs and practices in ways that distort the truth and power of the gospel.”<sup>7</sup> Even as we seek to understand different worldviews and seek to speak into them the Good News of Jesus Christ (contextualization), it ought not to be done with little foresight or thought. In the past, and even today, some — in their desire to reach those lost in sin — fail to critically analyze the contextualized message being transmitted. This results in “an uncritical incorporation of old beliefs and practices...which opens the door to syncretism of all kinds as well as to cultural and philosophical relativism, which destroys all truth and authority.”<sup>8</sup> Hiebert calls us to do “critical contextualization.”<sup>9</sup>

So, it's not just a question of the transmission of the Truth via contextualization that can become syncretized. The same can be true in the hearing and receiving: worldview and cultural practices may lead to the indiscriminate adoption of Christian practices. For example, a shaman may venerate the Virgin Mary. A Hindu may add Jesus to his pantheon of a million deities. A *santero* (one who prac-

6 Merriam-Webster Dictionary (2020). Phone app, retrieved 4/12/20.

7 Paul Hiebert et al., *Understanding Folk Religion* (1999), p. 13.

8 Hiebert et al., *Understanding Folk Religion*, p. 21.

9 *Ibid*, p. 21.

tices *santería*) may invoke the names of saints or biblical characters. Common among Pennsylvania Dutch farmers were hex signs painted on the sides of their barns to protect the animals inside from harm; this pre-Christian practice was adopted by Christians emigrating from Germany to the American Midwest.

And so, we now come to the main purpose of this chapter, which is to examine three world views — three ways of seeing the world around us. In each case, we are wearing a different set of colored lenses or different frameworks for interpreting the world. We need to recognize this and find ways to push through those differences in order to be effective in our church planting.

### **GUILT-BASED, SHAME-BASED, AND FEAR-BASED CULTURES (WORLD VIEWS)**

As we seek to present the Good News cross-culturally, we begin to notice differences between the three world views or orientations to life. We find that some people define their lives by a preoccupation with guilt, while others are concerned about shame, and still others about fear. These present themselves as *dichotomous world views* — that is, world views that pair two parts: *guilt/righteousness, shame/honor, and fear/power*.<sup>10</sup> Many of us are not fully conscious of these dichotomies and how they play out in our dealings with people who are different from ourselves. Nevertheless, these differences are very important and can help us to understand a culture and how to penetrate it with the saving news of Jesus Christ.

To be unaware of these differences can result in a lack of communication that could be problematic in our attempt to share the Good News with another person. The message must be communicated in

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<sup>10</sup> There is an element of fear in all three of these worldviews (1. I may be afraid of the punishment for my deed which would deter me from committing the sin. 2. I may be afraid of the shame I might bring on my family which helps regulate my actions and 3) I might be afraid of my lack of power and what might happen if a power controls me rather than me controlling that power.) Nevertheless, fear / power is a classical title for the third worldview.



the heart language of the person and in a context that makes sense to them. What we are transmitting may be from our worldview, while the person we want to reach sees the world through lenses of a different color. In a sense, we fail to see “eye to eye.” For example, to a person who has never seen snow, for us to mention that our sins can be made white as snow means nothing. Where bread is not a food staple, it is ineffective to speak of Jesus as the bread of life — that needs to be contextualized to Jesus being the manioc of life or rice of life. Otherwise, our message is being sent through blue lenses to a person who is wearing green lenses or yellow lenses.

What makes people “tick” — what speaks to the heart of a person — may be missed because our orientation is different from that of the listener. If a person from a guilt-based culture speaks to a person from a shame-based culture or a fear-based culture, what the person from the guilt-based culture considers Good News might fall on deaf ears, or be received with a distorted understanding.

It should be noted that many of us may be missing out on the best that the Bible has to offer if our worldview is not aligned with that of the human agents God used to record the Scriptures. We miss the significance of much of the Scriptures, which were written by people who lived in the Middle East and whose worldview made the understanding of that text natural and not forced. The Bible is indeed intended for *all* people — from north, south, east, and west — but it is basically a Middle Eastern text in its origin. Therefore, the Bible deals more with shame/honor and fear/power worldviews than with the guilt/righteousness worldview. For this reason, those born outside of the Middle East miss out on the richness of the Bible, which makes more sense oftentimes to those from the Middle East or Africa. A church planter will attempt to share the gospel through his or her cultural lenses, picking those passages that he or she feels speak to the heart issue of man when in fact such verses might not touch the hearts of other listeners who are operating in a different framework.

Only about a third of the world tends to look at the world through what we call guilt/righteousness. The rest of the world tends to interpret the world through shame/honor or fear/power world-views, or through a combination of the three different dichotomies.

Reference will be made to the “10/40 Window” in what follows. To put this in context, we need to describe this missiological phenomenon. The 10/40 Window is a “rectangular geographic area from North Africa to the Middle East to Asia, covering 68 countries.... Two-thirds of the world’s population live within the 10/40 Window.... Three out of every five people in the 10/40 Window have no access to the gospel.”<sup>11</sup>

With this elementary understanding of what the 10/40 Window refers to, the following quote will make more sense to those not versed in missiological vocabulary.

Roland Muller wrote a book that looks at these three dichotomies.<sup>12</sup> He writes, “Many western nations (Northern Europe, North America, Australia and New Zealand) have cultures that contain mostly guilt-based cultural characteristics. On the other hand, much of the 10/40 window<sup>13</sup> is made up of shame-based cultures. Most of the primal religions and cultures of the world (such as tribes in the jungles of Africa, Asia and South America) are structured around fear-based principles.”<sup>14</sup> Are you beginning to see the difficulty of communicating the gospel cross-culturally?

We will move on now to a closer look at each of these three world views.

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11 <https://advancingnativemissions.com/what-is-the-10-40-window-and-why-is-it-important/>, retrieved 7/7/21.

12 Roland Muller, *Honor and Shame: Unlocking the Door* (2000).

13 This is a missiological term for?? (NO SE ENCUENTRA EN EL ORIGINAL)

14 Muller, *Honor and Shame*, p. 20. See also Elmer, *Cross-Cultural Connections*, p. 173.

### *Guilt/Righteousness*

In the Western worldview, justice is determined based on guilt. In a court of law, deliberations are made to determine whether the accused is guilty or innocent of the charge.

In *Scenario 1* at the beginning of this chapter, Daoud was brought before a judge and jury to determine if he was guilty or innocent of robbery. The prosecuting attorney and the defense attorney presented their cases. The prosecutor tried to prove from evidence that Daoud had indeed committed the crime of robbery. Daoud's attorney tried to show that Daoud had not committed the crime. Then the judge instructed the jury to determine innocence or guilt, a determination that would be based on whether Daoud had broken a written law that described what robbery is. "The guilt is focused on the violation of specific prescribed behavior.... A guilt-based society responds to the external laws of the land, rules of the institution...."<sup>15</sup> When the verdict was returned, Daoud was declared guilty. The judge then pronounced sentence. Daoud had to spend the next two years in jail. Why? Because he was declared guilty. A guilty verdict, according to the law, demanded a punishment of two years in prison. By paying the price — two years of imprisonment — Daoud could be restored to society, now "righteous" in the eyes of the law.

If a church planter is working in a culture that is guilt/righteousness-oriented, he can use Bible passages that reflect this view. For example, "All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Romans 3:23). "There is no one righteous, not even one" (Romans 3:10). "The wages of sin is death" (Romans 6:23a). Those from a guilt-based culture will understand the scenario. When a law is broken, punishment needs to be meted out. The punishment "fits the crime," as Western police are known to say. Righteousness before the law has been lost — but the hope is that the punishment will restore the person in the eyes of the law to a position of guiltlessness,

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<sup>15</sup> Elmer, *Cross-Cultural Connections*, pp. 172-173.

to righteousness. So, as Westerners, we can say, “Jesus paid the price for our sinfulness. He died on the cross to make restitution for our sins.”

But not all countries work on the principle of guilt/righteousness.<sup>16</sup> Says Muller<sup>17</sup>:

The danger comes...when we take our Roman understanding of the gospel and apply it to those who do not have a Roman-based culture. We fruitlessly spend untold hours and incalculable amounts of energy explaining to our contact that he is guilty of sin and needs to be justified before God. The poor person, on the other hand, may not even have a word for sin, or perhaps even the concept of sin, in his language. He struggles to understand guilt and sees no need for justification. We must put our Roman, guilt-based understanding of the gospel aside, and strive to understand other worldviews and their thinking.

Jayson Georges and Mark Baker explain the same sentiment with these words: “Just as Westerners fail to adequately observe cultural underpinnings of shame and honor in today’s world, Western Christians also often overlook the prominent role of shame and honor in the Bible, though it comes from an shame-honor context.”<sup>18</sup>

So, the church planter needs to look at the other two worldviews and learn how to “transmit” the gospel into those contexts.

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16 It is important to know that although some cultures tend to be guilt-based or shame-based or fear-based, this is changing over time. Some cultures exhibit two of these tendencies while others exhibit all three. Jayson Georges and Mark Baker point out in their book *Ministering in Honor-Shame Cultures* (2016) that “the advent of social media reveals the Western craving for face. Observe the language of Facebook — ‘friends,’ ‘like,’ ‘status’” (p. 119). Even so, they go on to explain how Western shame tends to be individualistic, both *personal and private, while Eastern shame is public and communal* (p. 119).

17 Muller, *Honor and Shame*, pp. 32-33.

18 Georges and Baker, *Ministering in Honor-Shame Cultures*, p. 16.

### *Shame/Honor*

In some cultures, goodness and badness are based on what brings honor to an individual and his family or clan or community, and what brings shame. In *Scenario 2*, after Daoud was caught stealing and sentenced to prison, he felt ashamed. Note that he was not *repentant*, but he was *ashamed* of being caught. It was not the act of stealing that brought him embarrassment but the shame that came with being found out. Now he had lost honor in the eyes of his friends and family, and they in turn had lost honor because of his act. His action reflected poorly on himself, his family, and his community. Daoud is from a collectivistic society, not an individualistic one, so his actions and behaviors are not his own; they are viewed communally. No matter how rich or poor a person is in this particular culture, the important thing is to maintain honor and avoid shame in order to maintain “harmony” in the home and community.<sup>19</sup>

Let me give you another scenario from a shame-based culture.

**Scenario 4:** Timothy had performed poorly at work. His poor performance had cost his company a large contract. Timothy’s boss reprimanded him in front of his co-workers in the weekly meeting. After the meeting, Timothy went up to his boss and resigned.

Had Timothy felt guilty for his poor performance and the subsequent loss to the company? No. Timothy had lost face in front of his co-workers when his boss scolded him in public. This was an shame/honor incident.

Patty Lane points out that “saving face” is very important to those in an honor/shame culture. “The fear of ‘losing face,’ feeling shame or losing honor seems almost innate, as natural as breathing and as devastating as not breathing. It is a guiding force behind most interactions, or at the very least, the principle on which decisions are

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<sup>19</sup> See Christopher Flanders, “Fixing the Problem of Face” (2009), pp. 12-19. For insight about those who come to faith from an honor/shame culture, see also Jeannette Yep et al., *Following Jesus Without Dishonoring Your 8*).

made as to what is appropriate behavior.”<sup>20</sup> She offers suggestions about how not to lose face or cause someone else to lose face:

- Never ask questions that will force a person to admit making a mistake.
- Don’t ask questions that imply the other person is in need.

These remind me of the proper way to ask someone in Central America if they understood what you were saying. It would be very impolite to ask, “Did you understand me? Did you understand what I said?” Instead, it is more appropriate to ask, “*¿Me explico?*” (“Did I make myself clear?”). Also, in grammatically correct Spanish, a person never says, “I broke the vase” or “I forgot.” A different form of the verb is used so that it comes across as “The vase broke to me” (*Se me quebró*) or “It was forgotten to me” (*Se me olvidó*). It seems to soften the issue and saves the face of the speaker.

In a shame-based culture, honor is the most important thing in a person’s life. A person is constantly considering what will bring them honor as a member of a community, rather than what will make them guilty in the eyes of the law. Says Elmer, “In a culture shaped predominantly by shame controls, the *expectations*, sanctions, and restraints of the significant others [in this case, the community and family]... become the agents of behavior control.”<sup>21</sup> Notice the word *expectations*. It is not a law that controls one’s actions, but the expectations of one’s family and community. To be caught in an act that goes against the expectations of society or family results in dishonoring those very people we seek to please through our behavior.

This shame is sometimes expressed as “loss of face,” as in the case of Timothy above. Westerners have a difficult time understanding this. They may say, “Don’t take this personally, but...” Nevertheless, a listener from a shame-based culture will immediately sense shame and personalize it. Elmer shares some helpful insights about

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20 Patty Lane, *A Beginner’s Guide to Crossing Cultures* (2009), pp. 88-89.

21 Elmer, *Cross-Cultural Connections*, p. 172. (Italics and bracketed text added.)

this: "The Thai word for losing face means, literally, 'to tear someone's face off so they appear ugly before their friends and community.' The word among the Shona in Zimbabwe means, literally, 'to stomp your feet on my name.'"<sup>22</sup> These words are interchangeable: shame, loss of face, dishonor. They all represent the shame/honor worldview about which those from a guilt-based worldview usually do not understand.

It is obvious, then, that a church planter working in such a culture, or speaking with a person from such a culture, needs to consider issues of shame and honor when presenting the gospel. Scripture allows for the gospel to be presented in terms other than those focused on guilt and righteousness. Although Western church planters are schooled in speaking of the gospel in terms of guilt and righteousness, they need to consider other ways of contextualizing the age-old message. For example, Paul said, "*I am not ashamed of the gospel*" (Romans 1:16). Sin can be presented in terms of how it brings shame to oneself and to the community, and shame to God.

The church planter need not talk about guilt and righteousness in a shame culture. Even Jesus' death on the cross can be discussed as a shameful act (Hebrews 12:2) and how our condition before God has brought Jesus to this shameful point in His life. We have brought dishonor to Jesus by forcing Him to die on the cross. Honor is restored to Jesus in His resurrection from the dead, His ascension into heaven, and being seated at the right hand of God the Father. Only by accepting Jesus' death on our behalf can this shame be lifted. We are honored by being called sons and daughters of God. Even 1 Peter 2 shares the good news that if we put our trust in Jesus, the cornerstone, we need not be ashamed. How do we explain *justified* in an shame-honor culture? "To be justified is to be placed in proper relationship to God, to be made a full participant in the community

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<sup>22</sup> Elmer, *Cross-Cultural Connections*, p. 175. See also Elmer, *Cross-Cultural Conflict* (1993), p. 6.

of God's people....<sup>23</sup> Whereas the cross is an event of shame, the resurrection overflows with honor and glory."<sup>24</sup>

It is interesting that even in Western theology, there is a recognition of shame and honor, particularly in Louis Berkhof's *Systematic Theology*. He makes reference to the two states in Jesus' life: the state of humiliation (his incarnation, suffering, death, and burial) and the state of glorification (his resurrection, ascension, placement at the right hand of God, and his physical return). We see both shame and honor restored.

Romans is one New Testament book that is often cited as a polemic on guilt and righteousness. Nevertheless, several missiologists have shown how Romans could also be interpreted from an shame-honor perspective, or even from a fear-power perspective. Georges wrote an excellent article on this.<sup>25</sup> Even more extensive is Jackson Wu's book *Reading Romans with Eastern Eyes*. "By reading Romans with Eastern eyes," Wu notes, "we can discern key ideas and applications often overlooked or underemphasized by Western interpreters. An Eastern lens equips readers to see the significance of shame and honor in Paul's message and mission."<sup>26</sup>

Take a few minutes to think about this. Even pause here in your reading to leaf through Romans. What are some key words that pop out from the pages of Romans that speak of shame and honor? You will find this to be a helpful exercise in understanding how to use this particular book in reaching those in a shame-based culture.

### - PAUSE -

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23 This concept of being in community is often lost on Western believers, who tend to see salvation as a personal or individualistic action rather than a collectivistic or communal action.

24 Georges and Baker, *Ministering in Honor-Shame Cultures*, p. 112

25 Jayson Georges, "From Shame to Honor: A Theological Review of Romans for Honor-Shame Contexts" (2010).

26 Jackson Wu, *Reading Romans with Eastern Eyes: Honor and Shame in Paul's Message and Mission* (2019), p. 2.





Most of these are animistic cultures.<sup>28</sup> They may reside in the jungles of Asia or Latin America. They may be high in the *altiplano* of Peru. Even in major cities in both the East and the West, you will find people who live constantly in a fear-based culture even if those around them do not. Think of those who practice voodoo or *santería*. Consider those who consult their daily horoscope or put hex signs on their doors. People who cross their pointer fingers<sup>29</sup> over each other to make the sign of the cross are unwittingly exhibiting a fear-based practice.

Paul Hiebert and his colleagues Daniel Shaw and Tite Tiénou write, "In a world full of spirits, witchcraft, sorcery, black magic, curses, bad omens, broken taboos, angry ancestors, human enemies, and false accusations of many kinds, life is rarely carefree and secure.... Crops fail, game vanishes, plagues decimate the village, sudden death takes the young and strong, enemies attack at night, and rivals seek one's life."<sup>30</sup> They are referring to life in "traditional societies."

Fear, though, is not found only in traditional societies. It exists even in modern metropolitan areas. In many places around the world, it is (or was) a common practice on Palm Sunday to take home after the worship service a cross formed from palm branches to be placed above the door frame to ward off evil spirits. In medieval times, people often placed garlic around the house to keep vampires away. These were unfounded fears, but fears nevertheless. Some "sophisticated" people still consult a palm reader or visit a psychic out of fear of what will happen next.

Edward Hoskins writes, "As a physician, over the past twenty-five years I have watched many people die. For those who do not know Christ, the most common emotion was terror. Despite their

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28 For an excellent treatment of evangelism among those of a fear-based culture, see Gailyn Van Rheenen, *Communicating Christ in Animistic Contexts* (1991). See also chapter 7 in this book, "Church Planting in the Context of Animism."

29 Of course, the pointer finger in North America is different from the finger used for pointing in other cultures.

30 Hiebert et al, *Understanding Folk Religion*, p. 87.

outward religiosity, most Muslims I have met also live with the fear of what awaits them after death.”<sup>31</sup> The fear of death is one of the basic fears of many human beings. It is a fear of the unknown or, in their subconscious minds, a fear of not having been “good enough” to merit existence in a different dimension that exists beyond the confines of this world.

What Good News does the Bible have for those who live in fear? How should we address them? Thankfully, the Scriptures also speak the language of those who live in a fear/power culture. The Bible talks of many power encounters. The gospel gives many examples of power over the things that cause fear in the hearts of humans.

The Gospel of Matthew, for example, contains many references to God’s power over those things that cause fear in the hearts of mere humans. Jesus has a power encounter with the devil in the desert and is victorious over the devil (4:1-11). Jesus heals two men possessed by demons (8:28-34). Jesus heals a man with the dreaded disease called leprosy (8:1-4). Jesus demonstrates his power even over a stormy sea (7:23-27). Jesus even demonstrates God’s power over death by being raised from the dead (28:1-10). Jesus says, “All *authority (power)* in heaven and on earth is given to me.”

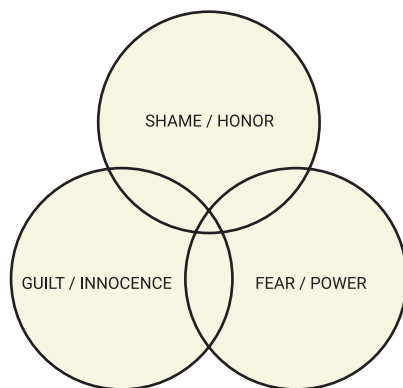
References to God’s power can be found in other New Testament books, too. Paul says, the “gospel is the power of God that brings salvation” (Romans 1:16). The angels tell the shepherds, “Be not afraid; for behold, I bring good tidings of great joy” (Luke 2:10 ESV). Jesus, appearing to His disciples after His resurrection, says, “Peace (Do not be afraid)” (Luke 24:36). Perhaps the greatest passage of Scripture used to overcome fear — Romans 8:31-39 — says we are victorious (“more than conquerors”) in Jesus. We have peace in our hearts instead of fear, for we know there is no power on earth or in the spiritual realms that can separate us from God through Jesus Christ (Romans 8:38-39).

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31 Edward Hoskins, *A Muslim’s Mind* (2011), p. 87.

For years, missionaries have known the effectiveness of power encounters — of demons being cast out or of people being healed, or even raised from the dead. Our Western culture tends to deny such miracles, but God cannot be put into a box. In the same way in which those who are from a guilt-based worldview can speak of *truth encounters*, those from a fear-based culture can experience *power encounters*. We can't limit God's behavior. The same God who divided the Red Sea is the God who can manifest miracles in today's world as means of bringing sinners to Himself. Depending on which version of the Bible you are quoting, the Scriptures contain anywhere from 75 to over 100 references to "fear not," "do not fear," and "be not afraid." Can you think of any cases when God showed Himself to you to be a God of power in the face of fear?

Muller makes it abundantly clear, though, that the Bible speaks to all three worldviews. "[T]he three themes of salvation are woven together in the scriptures, to present a complete picture of what God wants to do with mankind."<sup>32</sup>



## BEST PRACTICES

In ministering to persons from a shame/honor culture, here are some best practices to consider.

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32 Muller, *Honor and Shame*. p. 103.

- Never put a person in a situation in which they could “lose face” or perceive they are losing face. This can cause animosity and break the relationship you are trying to form.
- Recognize that in some cultures, individuals never accept guilt directly. Guilt needs to be expressed in terms of lost honor resulting in shame — not in terms of culpability.
- Whenever possible, evangelize an entire family rather than one individual. Shame/honor functions primarily among collectivistic societies, so the group needs to make a decision rather than the individual. To focus on a single person might put him or her at odds with the family, which could lead to ostracism or worse.
- You could focus on the person who has authority within a family or group. Even if this person does not come to Christ, he will probably give you permission to speak to the group since you approached him first to share your intent.
- Share Scriptures that speak to the heart of the person immersed in a shame/honor culture. These are texts that speak of belonging — belonging to God and his family. Share, for example, the “one anothers” found in the epistles of Paul. These are important for a community of believers as they live, work, and worship together.
- The assurance that comes from Romans 8:38-39 attests to the power of God through Jesus in eliminating fear.
- The Prodigal Son parable is an excellent Bible passage for study by members of a shame/honor culture because it deals with loss of honor, the resulting shame brought on an individual and his family, and his restoration to honor and to his family.

In ministering to persons from a fear/power culture, here are some best practices to consider.

- Share Scriptures that demonstrate the power of Jesus over evil and calamity. Resurrection from the dead, power over storms, and healings of any kind all attest to the power of Jesus. J. Herbert Kane writes, “We in the West equate religion with truth, forgetting that in the Third World people equate religion with power. We ask, ‘Is it true?’ They ask, ‘does it work?’”<sup>33</sup>
- The book of Acts is full of power encounters — of raising people from the dead, of demons exorcised in the name of Jesus, of scoffers reprimanded. In many fear-based cultures even today, the miraculous is what convinces people of the truthfulness of the gospel message.
- Don’t ridicule or call into question when a person shares an experience of evil spirits or is wearing an amulet. He sees something that you may not be seeing, especially if you are from a Western culture or a Western-influenced background. You may be the uninitiated, the “ignorant one” in this cultural context.

### Summary

Recognize, then, that as you consider church planting among practitioners of a world religion, you are dealing with one of these three worldviews. To be effective, you need to take into account how best to present the gospel message to that group. You need to consider how best to “contextualize” the Good News so that what is heard is truly good news to your listeners. The Holy Spirit will use those words, those Scriptural passages, to touch their hearts, to even pierce their hearts, with a knowledge of salvation to free them from *guilt*. This will also free them from *shame*, or free them from *fear*, placing them into a position of *righteousness* before God. This also places them in a position of *honor*, and *empowerment* to share this same Good News with others who have yet to hear and experience God’s love and forgiveness and restoration.

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33 Quoted in Paul F. Koehler, *Telling God’s Stories with Power: Biblical Storytelling in Oral Cultures* (2010).

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. List the three different worldviews outlined in this chapter.
2. Which one tends to be the dominant world view in your own life?
3. How can contextualization, taken to an extreme, lead to syncretism?
4. What does it mean to live in a guilt-based culture?
5. What texts would you use with such a person?
6. What does it mean to live in a shame-based culture?
7. What texts would you use with such a person?
8. What does it mean to live in a fear-based culture?
9. What texts would you use with such a person?

## PERSONAL NOTES

*Please use this space for writing your own reflection or a prayer regarding the content of this chapter.*

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## Church Planting in the Context of Roman Catholicism

*Xoán Castro*

*Epilogue by Daniel Sánchez*

I received my university degree in the historic Spanish city of Santiago de Compostela, capital of the autonomous community of Galicia. It is common there to cross paths with thousands of visitors from all parts of the world. They come with the desire to embrace the monument in the altar of the Santiago Cathedral that represents James the Great, disciple of our Lord Jesus Christ. The crowds have other reasons for visiting the city, too. One is tourism — they are attracted by the history and rich culture that envelop every street and building. But for most visitors, coming to the Cathedral — an outstanding monument of the Romanesque style — is the completion of an intense pilgrimage that is intended to be an experience of change, something that transcends the pilgrims. For those who come following instructions from the Catholic church, the goal of the pilgrimage is to effect “forgiveness of their sins.”

Even back in 1980, when I was not yet an evangelical, but a Catholic, all of that seemed pretty strange to me. Doesn’t the church have a message of transformation, of forgiveness and hope, that doesn’t depend on rites and human effort, I wondered? Could a pilgrimage earn the favor of God?

Many people believe it can. Not only that, they pass along their rites and beliefs to the coming generations. Hundreds of thousands will continue to flock to Santiago, seeking something different than what they are experiencing in their normal daily religious life. Is following ritual instructions and commandments that were generated throughout the ups and downs of the history of the Catholic church the answer?

## INTRODUCTION

A faith community is founded, primarily, in the character and nature of God. Furthermore, it understands its mission — its purpose to the world — and it organizes its outreach to edify its members and to impact the world in an efficient way by being conscious of the context in which it operates.<sup>1</sup> When all these elements are taken into account, that congregation — that church — understands that it makes sense to look outward. It is by going out that a faith community becomes light to the world, salt to the earth, and a city impossible to hide.

We are “called out.” To respond effectively to that call, we cannot ignore our context: the dominant worldview, in all its cultural, religious, economic, geographical, and social aspects. According to the late missiologist David Hesselgrave, understanding the worldview (belief systems) of another person is the starting point to communicating the gospel. We have to communicate the Word of God in a way that makes sense to those who listen. As has been said many times, in our modern society in which the only permanent thing is constant change, one needs to communicate the unchanging gospel of God in a relevant way.

Throughout this chapter, we will discuss, in a respectful but faithful and clear way, the religion that so many millions of people pro-

<sup>1</sup> The text is based on the information contained in the bibliography referred to at the end of the chapter. Our appreciation to the various authors from which many of the data provided are extracted.

fess in the world. Roman Catholicism very forcefully reflects the worldview of many of the countries in which we strive to advance the gospel of the kingdom of God through the planting of new churches — healthy churches that drink in the crystalline waters of the Word of God and try their best not to be contaminated by human traditions of whatever nature. Healthy churches consider the human being in a holistic way and try to bring relevant answers to the questions and needs of the people for whom the Son of God died.

### **SOME FACTS ABOUT CATHOLICISM**

Catholicism is a religion that originated in early Christianity and recognizes the Pope in Rome as the supreme spiritual authority over the whole planet. It considers itself to be the only repository of the doctrine founded by Jesus Christ and entrusted to the apostle Peter. Throughout history, Catholicism has spread throughout the whole world. A particularly high proportion of the population of countries in southeastern Europe have been Catholic over many centuries, and this is true also of the Americas from the colonial age until today. Currently it is estimated that there are more than 1.3 billion baptized Catholic believers around the world.

These are the main characteristics of Catholicism:

- The Roman Catholic Church considers itself to be the only church founded by Christ and entrusted to spread the Christian teachings throughout the world.
- Its fundamental doctrines are found in its creed.
- It has a hierarchy headed by the Pope in Rome and the cardinals, followed by the clergy: bishops, priests, and deacons.
- The seat of Catholicism is the Vatican in Rome. From there the religion is promulgated to the rest of the world.
- The Catholic Church claims its main guide is the Bible, along with the ecumenical councils and hierarchically approved tradition.

- The principal Catholic rite is the mass, during which the priest performs the eucharist. It is believed that in the moment of the consecration of the bread and the wine, these elements become the body and blood of Jesus Christ (known as *transubstantiation*).
- The Catholic Church has a long tradition of venerating icons and saints.
- Mary, the mother of Jesus, is considered a perpetual virgin and is venerated and treated with special devotion.
- Catholicism accepts the theology of *purgatory*, a place where souls are purified of their sins after death and before they are able to definitely enter heaven.
- The material signs that represent and award spiritual grace to followers of Catholicism are the seven sacraments: baptism, confirmation, eucharist, penance, anointing of the sick, Holy Orders, and marriage.
- The practice of celibacy by the clergy forbids them from marrying and having children.

## THE HISTORY OF CATHOLICISM

The original followers of Jesus of Nazareth began to spread His teachings during the first century of our era. It is difficult to pinpoint when and how Catholicism emerged. Little by little, customs and various theological interpretations started to appear in certain local ecclesiastical communities, shaping certain features of an emerging Catholicism. In the second century, Ignatius of Antioch gave the name *Catholicism* (which means “universal”) to the religion of the followers of Christ. We’ll examine the circumstances of this period in a little more detail.

### *The Church under Roman Rule*

During its inception, Christianity existed in relative peace under Rome due to the official protection that was granted to Judaism. During this time, Roman authorities regarded the new religion as

a little sect within the ancient faith of Israel. However, as we see in the book of Acts, the “Followers of Jesus,” as they were called, faced significant opposition from the Jewish clergy. The destruction of Jerusalem in the year 70 A.D. was the first point of inflection in the history of the church because it was then that it was expelled from the “protective” umbrella of Judaism.

Over the next 280 years, the followers of Christ were persecuted and terribly punished. Early in this timespan the persecution did not necessarily happen throughout the whole empire; most persecution then was local, driven by province officials. Later, persecution took place throughout the empire. These were violent times and thousands of Christians were tortured and murdered in horrible, cruel ways.

This historical period is a compelling counterpoint to the assertion of many people that “Jesus was just a fraud.” From tradition and historical data, it is clear that those who knew Him were willing to die for who they believed He was. Here is just a partial list.

- Paul was jailed under the rule of Nero, and later beheaded in Rome.
- James, brother of John, was beheaded by Herod (Acts 12:2).
- Thomas reached India, where he was “murdered by an arrow.”
- Simon Peter was crucified (according to Jerome) upside down in Rome during the rule of Nero.
- Simon the Zealot preached throughout North Africa and was crucified.
- Mark founded the church in Egypt and was burned alive.
- Bartholomew preached in Armenia and, after several persecutions, was beaten with sticks, then crucified; after being slashed, he was beheaded.
- Andrew evangelized in Ethiopia; he was crucified.
- Matthew preached in Egypt and Ethiopia until, by order of the king, he was pierced with a spear.
- Philip ministered in Greece and was “crucified and stoned to death.”



- James, brother of Jesus, was beaten to death by Pharisees and Sadducees.
- The apostle John was exiled to the island of Patmos. He died of natural causes.

Even though many of these stories could be historically correct, nonetheless, they must be treated with a certain skepticism, since in the second century after Christ, churches in various cities began to claim apostolic origins and wanted to point to a martyred apostle as their founder. This is evidence of the focus that many of the early Christians gave to persecutions and the reverence they had towards those who suffered.

In 303, the emperor Diocletian, along with the Roman tetrarch Galerius, unleashed what is known as the “Great Persecution” in an attempt to restore the unity of the state. Diocletian felt threatened by what he saw as the unceasing growth of Christianity. Among other things, he ordered the burning of copies of Scriptures and the demolition of Christian churches. He also sentenced church authorities to death, barred Christians from public office and deprived them of their civil rights, and prohibited worship of their God under penalty of death.

These measures to eliminate Christianity proved ineffective. So in 311, Galerius — motivated by clemency and political opportunity — published the Edict of Toleration through which anti-Christian persecution ceased. It made it legal to be a Christian and gave Christians the freedom to meet, hold celebrations, and build temples.

Two years later, Licinius and Constantine — the emperors of the eastern and the western regions of the Roman Empire, respectively — met in Milan and established that “all subjects, including expressly Christians, were authorized to freely follow whatever religion they prefer.” This surpassed the decree issued by Galerius two years earlier that simply “tolerated” Christians. Under Licinius and Constantine’s “Edict of Milan,” Christians could ascend

in rank of positions in the empire. In fact, one of the emperors ended up becoming a Christian and gave the church many donations that would become the foundation of the temporal power that the church would have through the years. His mother, who is counted among the saints as Saint Elena, would be one of the people to exert her influence so that, after some years, the religion that was persecuted would end up being the only religious option the emperors gave their subjects.

In 380, the three reigning Roman emperors issued the Edict of Thessalonica, also known as the *Cunctos Populos*, which declared that the Catholic Church was the only religion that could be followed in the domains of the Roman Empire. In three centuries Catholicism had gone from being an outlawed religion to being the only one supported by the government itself — to the point of prohibition of all other religions.

### *The Rise of the Popes*

Constantine and his successors gave their support to the Bishop of Rome as the supreme ruler of the church. Of course, it was better for the unity of the Roman empire that the ruling government and the seat of religion should be centered in the same place. While within the church, many other bishops resisted the idea of a supreme Roman bishop, through the power and influence of the Roman emperors the Roman bishop eventually rose to supremacy, as what we now call Pope.

The main goal of this series of events was to unify the Roman empire through religion. The result — which the Roman authorities did not expect — was that Catholicism began to expand rapidly. Under the protection of the emperor, the church transitioned into positions of authority, taking the faith to the masses. It was the era of the great councils. Some Christians who were uncomfortable with courts and palaces retired to the deserts, searching again for the authenticity of service; the monastic movement began to form.

Nevertheless, most Christians understood the favor of God to be in the union of the church and the Roman state in the West. In the East, this “marriage” lived for a thousand years more — until 1453, when Turkish Muslims invaded and ended the Byzantine empire.

But things proceeded differently in the western part of the empire. At the end of the 5th century, after the Huns and other barbaric hordes conquered that region of the empire, the Pope presented himself as the builder of the medieval church on the foundation of the past glory of Rome. The Roman Church mobilized Benedictine monks as missionaries and ambassadors to Germany and other places. With the help of Christian princes, little by little they continued pacifying and baptizing the people of the nations of the European continent.

However, mass baptism amounted to baptizing pagans. Soon corruption was noticeable, corruption that, with time, sparked a clamor for spiritual renewal. Monastic orders such as the Benedictines of Cluny Abbey in France seized on this reform, and eventually it even reached the Pope. Gregory VII was the most important reforming Pope. Eventually, the crusades and the scholastic philosophy became testimonies to this Papal sovereignty.

As the saying goes: “Power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely.” The church gained the (known) world but lost its soul. After the 12th century, the Waldensians, Albigensians, and even Franciscans formed a constant reformist trend. Many of them agreed that in the New Testament there is no mention of certain things the Church was teaching. For example, some of them questioned the authority of the Pope and the veneration or adoration of Mary. (They also questioned the immaculate conception of Mary, the perpetual virginity of Mary, the ascension of Mary, or Mary as co-redeemer and mediator). The petitions to the saints, the apostolic succession, the ordinances of the church as sacraments, infant baptism (in the Roman view), the confession of sins to a priest, purgatory, indulgences, or the parallel authority of ecclesiastic tradition and

Scriptures were not always practiced with the same fervor. Nevertheless, many of these beliefs continued even after the Reformation. In the midst of the battle for earthly power amid growing evidence of a sterile religion, in the 14th and 15th centuries many Christians returned to the Bible in search of a fresh vision and renewal. During the age of European colonization on the American continents, the Catholic religion was imposed on the inhabitants of the Spanish New World. In this way Catholicism managed to expand, forming the religion with the most followers around the whole world. However, the Reformation was at the door.

### *The Medieval Exegesis of Catholicism*

By the end of the 15th century, when Martin Luther shook the world, the Bible had come to be considered as, in the words of the scholastic Buenaventura, “an intrinsic jungle in which entering is dangerous.” Buenaventura, a Franciscan friar promoted to cardinal, made that statement in the 13th century, and until the 15th century the sacred Scriptures were regarded by Catholics (and the whole world) as a confusing, occult, and difficult book to understand. The widespread belief was that interpretation of the Bible could only be carried out by the canonic elite and the theologians at the service of the Pope.

The distinguished contemporary Spanish theologian and writer Professor José Grau shed helpful light on the distortion of the Word of God that took place in the Medieval Age, and he is similarly helpful regarding the Catholic Church's distortion of the conclusions of Martin Luther and other reformers. Professor Grau says that both Gregory VII (who was pope from 1073–1085) and Pope Innocent III (1198–1216) taught that the two swords mentioned in Luke 22:38 are important symbols of the power of the Pope and the power of the king, which belong to the pontiff in Rome, but this concedes one of them to the princes so that they may use it according to papal instructions and in service to the Roman Church. Innocent III also interpreted Deuteronomy 17 as saying that in the old covenant,

Jews could bring difficult court cases to the Levite priests and had to submit to the sentence. Through a slight interpolation, Innocent III converted the Levite priests into the High Priests of Rome and made the sacred text say that whoever did not submit to the decisions of the High Pontiff would be sentenced to death.

Continuing his argument, Grau mentions that Pope Leo X (1513–1521), a contemporary of Luther, cited the same passage — with the same textual corruption — in a papal bull (decree) in which the book of Kings was recognized as sacred, in order to demonstrate that whoever disobeyed the pope was bound to death. Innocent III wrote to the Greek patriarch in Constantinople: “Christ has given governance over the whole world to the popes.” As conclusive evidence, he added, “Peter in one occasion walked on the waters that represented the nations and, therefore, his successors have the same right to govern over the whole world, which also includes the seat of the Greek patriarchs.”

Added to this, we have the curious interpretation of Pope Boniface VIII (1294–1303) regarding 1 Corinthians 2:15, in which Paul writes: “The person with the Spirit makes judgments about all things.” In his 1302 papal bull *Unam Sanctam*, Boniface VIII identified the Pope as the “spiritual man” and asserted that he was the supreme judge over all nations and kings. Referring to the Old Testament prophets’ announcement of God’s judgment in the Old Testament, in which they spoke of destruction and desolation, Boniface VIII believed this alluded to power that had been given to him by God to destroy and uproot, according to his will, all who opposed him in the church and the state. The psalmist’s proclamation that the Messiah would reign with an iron staff was taken as proof of the task and the right of the popes to establish the Inquisition and its capital punishments (death sentences).

Professor Grau points out numerous examples of diverse popes’ justification of the burning of witches or sorcerers using a curious medieval exegesis based on the words of Jesus when He said that

all who have no communion with Him are a bad branch of the vine that has become dry and is no longer useful but is to be thrown into the fire.

One last case that should be mentioned is that of the preaching on Revelation 21:1 by Cardinal Cayetano in the Fifth Council of the Lateran (1512–1517), during Martin Luther's lifetime. Cayetano identified the Celestial Jerusalem as the Roman Church, which, he argued, had descended from the heavens and was already being governed by the Vicar of Christ (the pope).

The same thought was repeated by other speakers at the same Council. In its sixth session, the Bishop of Modrusium described the Roman Church as the “wife of Christ” and added: “Do not cry, daughter of Zion, because the Lion of the tribe of Judah has come, the root of David has arrived. Behold, God has raised up a savior who will save you from your desolate hands. Oh, very blessed Lion [Pope Leo X], we have confidence; Scripture is its own interpreter, and does not need an authority superior to it, that you will be our savior.”

These are just a few examples of how the Scriptures were interpreted in the medieval Catholic Church. On what hermeneutical basis could the sacred text be made to serve these purposes?

In many cases, there was not the slightest exegetical concern, and no attempt was even made to hermeneutically justify the fantastic deductions that were reached. Grau comments that, nevertheless, behind this practice there was a certain way of using the biblical text. A medieval author who summarized Catholic teachings about the meanings of Scripture proposed that we can find four meanings in it: the literal sense, the allegorical sense, the moral sense, and the anagogical sense. The Catechism of the Catholic Church has also included this teaching. What is meant by “the literal sense” needs no explanation. “The allegorical sense” refers to a passage, whatever its content, giving some teaching about the Church, its worship,

and its government. " "The moral sense" (or "tropological sense") was understood in the Medieval Age as the explanation of a passage in relation to present things; for example, the passages in Leviticus that speak of animal sacrifices were interpreted as lessons about the mortification of the animal part of man, the body, and penance in general. The final category, "the anagogical sense," referred to the last things: heaven, hell, and the delights of the blessed and torments of the damned.

### *The Catholic Church and the Protestant Reformation*

Luther opposed this way of interpreting the Bible. He advocated a grammatical-historical literal sense, guided by a Christocentric mentality. With typically direct, colorful language, Luther commented that this hermeneutic of the four meanings was like a "wax nose" with which one could do whatever one wanted.

José Grau affirms that the scientific hermeneutics of Scriptures began with the reformers, specifically with Luther. They built on the writings of the so-called Fathers of the Ancient Church, like Chrysostom, Basil, and others. The Roman Church was imposing an interpretation that was far from correct.

In hermeneutics we talk about a before and after Luther. For all reformers, Christ is the center and sovereign of Scripture. And if for Jerome, to ignore Scripture equals ignoring Christ, for the reformers ignoring Christ is to ignore Scripture.

Luther was not interested in word games with the medieval scholars. He affirmed and was sustained by a fundamental truth of the Christian faith: that our confidence and security do not rest in anything human, but rather in the objective revelation of God and the objective revelation of Christ. Hence his firmness and his comparison to an immovable rock.

The grammatical-historical-Christological method led to the consistent principle that Scripture is its own interpreter and does not have an authority superior to it. We should not consider someone who is not God to be more suitable to express God and make Him understood than God Himself. It would be the same as asking for candles to be lit to help the sun.

When Luther argued that Scripture interprets Scripture, he meant that the whole of the Bible constitutes the interpreter of the parts of the Bible that cannot contradict each other and must harmonize with the overall content of the revelation. Thus, no part of Scripture should be interpreted in such a way as to distort the teaching of the whole of it at any point. It is not enough to rely on some isolated verses. This is what some cults do, and it is evident also in the exegesis and hermeneutics of the medieval Catholic Church.

## THE STAGES OF THE EVOLUTION OF CATHOLICISM

Following the theological thought of Leonardo de Chirico, the Italian pastor and church historian, we could frame the history of the Catholic Church in three stages.

### *The Imperial Church (through the Mid-16th Century)*

The first stage can be called the *Imperial Church*. As we have already mentioned, after the turning point of Constantine, Catholicism was rapidly transformed into a religious empire, forged in the institutional mold of the empire and propelled by an imperial ideology. From the ashes of the Roman Empire, the imperial church was raised up with an institutional pyramid structure enveloping it in the Christian language and symbols. Christian orthodoxy has been gradually widened in an attempt to take in new beliefs and new practices, some of which contradict the Christian faith. The desire to represent all of humanity has displaced the entry point into



the Church, which is conversion to Christ. In Catholicism, instead of sincere conversion to Christ, baptism administered by the church became the entry point. One might say it became a church made up of baptized people, not necessarily believers.

Here biblical revelation has in fact been relativized due to the increasing role of tradition in the Catholic Church. The grace of God has been transformed into the property of a religious institution that claims it can administer and dispense it through its sacramental system. In this era, all of the biblical renewal movements were either battled or assimilated through a policy of domestication to imperial ideology. Attempts at different forms of spirituality were minimized in such a way that they were not a threat and were lifeless; thus, the status quo was maintained.

### *Oppositional Catholicism (Late 16th Century through the Mid-20th Century)*

The second stage would be *Oppositional Catholicism*. This corresponds to the period of the Counter-Reformation, which stretched between two central events: the Council of Trent (1545-1563) and the First Vatican Council (1869-1870). This long arc of the Roman Catholic Church's history was characterized by a doctrinal tendency that was oppositional (in the face of the Protestant Reformation), but was also interested in affirming the centrality and superiority of the Church. This was the age in which the church was like an *alter Christus*, the age in which the church expressed the doctrine of the two sources of Revelation: Scripture and Tradition. In this era, the Church solidified its claim that its imperial structure is the divine will of God.

Confronted with the Protestant Reformation that invited the Church to rediscover the gospel of the grace of God, Rome reinforced a sacramental system that made the Church the mediator of divine grace. Modernity was pushing towards a revision of the church's prerogatives over the consciences of the people and society.

To counter that, Rome elevated its main institution, the papacy, to an even more accentuated role, as well as dogmatizing some beliefs about Mary without any kind of biblical support. This reinforcement of a solid identity led also to expansion of the Roman Catholic Church's mission efforts and to the development of some mystic and Marian forms of spirituality.

### *Compatible, Captivating Catholicism (1960s to Present)*

The third stage would be that of *Compatible and Captivating Catholicism*. The oppositional method led Catholicism to isolation and a marginal role. The change took place with the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965), commonly known as Vatican II. It began when, instead of safeguarding the church from the modern world, Rome changed strategies, choosing to assimilate so as to penetrate culture without changing the church's very essence.

This adaptation did not include a true structural reformation; there was no renunciation of tradition. One might say it involved additions but no subtraction. It would come to be a different posture, a new style, a new language. It moved towards theological liberalism, leaving space for a critical reading of the Bible and for the rise of universalism. In other ways, it promoted learning the language of evangelical spirituality (such as contemporary music and a personal relationship with Christ). When it came to Mariology, both traditionalism and ecumenism were promoted. All of this was to present Catholicism as expansive, while still preserving imperial, hierarchical, and sacramental structures (presented discreetly but definitely still present). All of this supported and revolved around traditional Catholic doctrine and ecclesiology.

In our opinion, the current Pope, Francis, incarnates the Catholicism of Vatican II: open to dialog, merciful, pleasing, but without paying great costs in the spiritual, theological, or dogmatic realms. The imperial frame remains, and so does that of the Counter-Refor-

mation of the previous ages, but the Catholic Church has “caught up” with the new requirements of the contemporary global world. It speaks all the languages: evangelical, ecumenical, interreligious, secular, and traditional. It is important to point out that it manages to make connections with everyone — from the secularist to the Muslim, including Protestants and liberal evangelicals.

This raises a question, though: Is the Catholic Church actually close to anyone? It seems more likely that the church's strategy in its attempt to be a “catholic” (all-encompassing universal church) is to make the necessary cultural accommodations and compromises to get the largest number of adherents to what it considers itself to be: the one true apostolic church.

## CONCLUSION

In this climate, some church historians claim that in practical terms, the Reformation has ended, because there is no longer any oppositional Catholicism that rejects reform. Catholicism has broadened its synthesis and has also made room for the major concerns of the Reformation, although cutting out its innovative nature and aimed at allowing them to coexist and cohabit and live with other demands which are opposed to the gospel. On the surface the contemporary Catholic Church appears to have embraced pluralism, but deep down it remains Roman and papal.

Can the church of Rome be renewed from within? We understand that the gospel cannot be regarded as one option among many possibilities; it must be a radical “yes” to the Word of God that says “no” to all forms of idolatry. Can any church be programmatically open to a multitude of offerings? Or, if it wants to be a church, must it be founded exclusively on the biblical gospel? For us, the answer is obvious.

It is important to stress that what I have written here about institutional and doctrinal aspects of the Roman Catholic Church does not necessarily extend to all Catholics as individuals. The grace of God is at work in men and women who, although they consider themselves Catholics, trust exclusively in the Lord, cultivate a personal relationship with Him, read the Bible, and live as Christians. I know a good number of true believers who fall under this definition.

However, they should be encouraged to reflect on whether their faith is compatible with membership in the Catholic Church. That was my own path when, as a Catholic, I sought answers and quenched my deep spiritual thirst. Even taking into account the changes that are being noticed in the Catholic Church today, we still have the obligation to evangelize those who accept the errors of the Church and who base their hope of eternity on it.

*Now, Dr. Daniel Sánchez will share his ideas regarding best practices for evangelizing the traditional Roman Catholic today.*

## Best Practices for Church Planting in the Context of Roman Catholicism

*Daniel Sánchez*

Some time ago, while I was conversing with a Roman Catholic about spiritual matters she asked: “What is the difference between Baptists and Catholics?” I smiled and said, “There are significant differences, but is it okay with you if we start with things we have in common?” “Yes, that would be fine,” she answered.

I then proceeded to ask her: “Do you believe in God as the creator of the heavens and the earth and our creator?” “Yes,” she replied, “I was taught that in catechism.” Then I asked her: “Do you believe in the Holy Spirit?” “Yes, of course,” she responded, “I affirm that every time I do the sign of the cross, in the name of the Father and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.”

Then I inquired: “Do you believe that Jesus is the Son of God, born of the ‘Virgin Mary’?” “Oh, yes,” she replied, “I have always believed that.” I then proceeded to ask her: “Do you believe that Jesus died on the cross for the sins of humanity?” She answered, “Yes, I do, and I really think about it during Lent and especially on Good Friday.”

I then asked her, “Do you believe that Jesus died on the cross for your sins and if you repent of your sins and invite Jesus into your life to be your Savior, He will forgive you of your sins and give you peace in your heart? Are you completely sure that He is always with you and that when you die you are going to be in heaven with Him?” She replied, “I have not heard that explained to me in that way before. This is new to me. Would you be willing to give me some time to think about it?” She then added, “Would you be willing to come to my house next week so we can talk about it some more?” I replied, “Yes, I will be happy to do it.”

I then asked, “Would you please bring me your Bible so I can suggest something that you might want to be reading this week?” When she brought it, I opened it up to the Gospel of John, put a marker there and said: “Read this portion of the Word of God which is about the life and ministry of Jesus, and as you do, ask God to help you understand it.” She promised me that she would. I then asked her if it would be okay if I prayed for her. She graciously agreed. I started with the Lord’s Prayer, which she repeated with me. I then asked the Lord to bless her with His presence as she sought to draw near to Him.

The next week when I arrived at her home, she took my hand and said: “I have invited Jesus into my life and I really feel a peace in my heart.”

As I have reflected on this, I have concluded that there were several things I did that enabled this woman to be very receptive.

*First, it was very helpful to begin our conversation with what we had in common.* There would be time later for us to talk about our differences but the important thing was to lead her to an experience with Jesus Christ. When the jailer at Philippi asked Paul and Silas, “What must I do to be saved?,” their answer was “Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved” (Acts 16:31 ESV). They did not seek to straighten out the jailer on every erroneous belief that he

might have. There would be time for that in the discipleship process. The main focus should be to lead people to Christ.

*Second, it was helpful for me to go from what this person already knew to what she needed to know.* Some people make the mistake of trying to prove that Catholics are wrong in all they believe. This offends and alienates them. When Paul spoke to the Jews in the synagogue in Antioch of Pisidia, he started by talking about their patriarchs and their prophets and then presented Jesus as the fulfillment of their prophecies (Acts 13:16-41). This woman I shared the gospel with knew all about Jesus' death on the cross but did not know what this meant to her personally. Many Catholics know quite a bit about the teachings of their church but are not acquainted with what the Bible teaches about their personal salvation.

*Third, it was helpful that I was patient and willing to give her time to reflect on the things that I had shared with her.* Some of the teachings of the Bible are totally new to some Catholics, as was true of this woman. It takes time and prayer for them to fully understand them. While we want them to receive Christ as soon as possible, pressuring them may only cause some of them to resist or withdraw.

*Fourth, in my conversation with her I made it a point to focus on what the Bible said — not on my opinions.* This way, as I provided answers to her questions she would know that these were not my views or opinions, but the Word of God. The Bible says: "Faith cometh by hearing and hearing by the Word of God" (Rom. 10:17 KJV).

As we seek to enable our dear Catholic relatives and friends to experience salvation in Jesus Christ, two things will greatly help us: knowing what Jesus taught about salvation, and learning from Jesus how to share the good news of salvation. In his dialog with Nicodemus found in the third chapter of the Gospel of John, we find what Jesus taught about salvation.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> This following segment is a very brief summary of the material covered in chapters 1 and 3 in Daniel R. Sánchez and Rudolph D. Gonzalez, *Sharing the Good News with Roman Catholic Friends* (2003).

## WHAT JESUS TAUGHT ABOUT SALVATION

In his dialog with Nicodemus (John 3:1-21), Jesus taught very important truths about the nature of salvation.

### *It Is a Spiritual Experience*

Jesus taught Nicodemus that salvation is a spiritual experience. He told him, "You must be born again" (v. 7) and unless a person is born of the spirit, he cannot see the kingdom of God (v. 5). It is obvious that Nicodemus had tried to be a good person and had tried very diligently to practice the religious teachings of his faith. In fact, he was "a teacher of the law." Yet he did not have a personal relationship with God. This is why Jesus told him that he needed to have a spiritual experience that would transform his life so much that the only way to describe it is that he had been "born from above."

Like Nicodemus, many of our dear Catholic friends have knowledge about God but have not had a personal spiritual experience with Jesus Christ. As was true of Nicodemus, there is a spiritual void in their lives.

### *It Is a Gift from God*

Jesus stated that "God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten son" (John 3:16 RSV). Some of our Catholic friends feel that they have to do something to merit salvation. That is why they focus on doing good things to gain God's favor. The apostle Paul clearly teaches in Ephesians 2:8 that "for it is by grace you have been saved, through faith - and this is not from yourself, it is the gift of God." The word grace means "unmerited favor." This means that we do not deserve God's forgiveness, but because He loves us, He offers us salvation. That is why we can affirm that salvation is a gift.



### *It Is Attained by Faith*

The Catholic Church teaches that salvation is attained through the observance of the sacraments.<sup>2</sup> It defines a sacrament as a channel through which grace is imparted. In other words, grace is received when a person receives a sacrament. It should be pointed out that Jesus taught that salvation is attained by receiving God’s gift, not by participating in a series of religious rites. Again, Jesus affirmed that whoever believes in him will not perish but will have eternal life.

### *We Can Have Assurance About Salvation*

Jesus taught that we can have assurance about salvation. He mentioned this to Nicodemus in John 3:18: “Whoever believes in him is not condemned.” He further affirmed this when he stated that whoever hears his word and believes in the one who sent him has eternal life. This one is not condemned but has passed from death to life (John 5:24).

The Catholic Church does not teach the assurance of salvation. In fact, it teaches that even highly committed persons (“the saints”) did not have the assurance that they would go straight to heaven when they died.<sup>3</sup> As a result of the absence of the assurance in the teachings of the Catholic Church, many of our dear Catholic friends can be very sincere as they participate in all of the rituals of their church (including the sacraments) — yet they do not have the assurance that they will go to heaven when they die.

This is why it is such good news to Catholics when they hear the gospel of Jesus Christ: that salvation is a spiritual experience, that it is a gift from God, that it is attained through faith, and that they can have complete assurance that they will go to heaven when they die. To this point, we have focused on what Jesus taught about salvation during his dialog with Nicodemus, a very religious person. In

2 Michael A. McGuire, *Baltimore Catechism* No. 1 (1942), 36; James Killgallon, Gerard Weber, and Leonard Ziegmann, *Life in Christ* (1967), 31.

3 Albert J. Nevins, M. M., *Answering A Fundamentalist* (1990), 67.

this next segment we are going to describe how Jesus witnessed to the Samaritan woman, a person who was nominally religious and whose lifestyle reflected her need to hear the gospel message.

## THE MODEL OF JESUS: HOW WE CAN SHARE THE GOOD NEWS OF SALVATION

The dialog that Jesus had with the Samaritan woman (John 4:4-26) reveals marvelous truths about God and also gives us an example of how the good news of salvation can be shared with our dear Catholic friends and relatives.

### *Cultivate Friendship*

Jesus cultivated a friendship. This is the first thing we find in Jesus' dialog with the Samaritan woman. He did this by going out of His way geographically. Verse 4 states that "he had to go through Samaria." The Greek phrase that is translated as "he had to" is *Edei de*, and it conveys a sense of commitment perhaps best translated as "it behooved him." As John explains in verse 9, "the Jews [did] not associate with Samaritans." Most Jews circumvented Samaria to avoid contact with Samaritans.

Jesus' example challenges us to go out of our way geographically to cultivate friendships with those who do not have a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. How often do we follow our established traffic patterns from home to work, to church, to business places, to fellowship with church members — but never go out of our way to meet people who need to hear the gospel message?

Jesus also cultivated a friendship by going out of His way socially. It was not customary for a Jew to talk with a Samaritan and for a rabbi to talk to a woman publicly. This is why the Samaritan woman was startled and said, "How is it that You, being a Jew, ask a drink of me, a Samaritan woman?" (v. 9 NKJV). The answer can be found in

what Jesus said about Zacchaeus: "...The Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost" (Luke 19:10). Jesus was willing to go out of His way geographically and socially to share the message of salvation with the Samaritans.

Cultivating a friendship is absolutely essential in witnessing to people with a Catholic background. It is essential that we develop a relationship of trust so they will know that we truly have their best interest at heart when we are seeking to lead them to an experience of salvation in Jesus Christ. Let me ask you, when was the last time you invited a Catholic person to your home for a meal, or to a sport or artistic event? It is often as friendships are established that people feel free to talk about spiritual matters. The advice here, then, is to cultivate genuine friendships with people who need to hear about the Lord.

### *Create Interest*

Jesus created an interest by going from a physical need to a spiritual need. The Samaritan woman came to draw physical water, so Jesus started the conversation by asking her for a drink. As the conversation progressed, however, Jesus moved from speaking about physical water to spiritual water. He offered her "living water" (John 4:10-14). This was spiritual water for the thirst of her soul.

As you read this you might be asking yourself, "How can I get people interested in spiritual things?" From Jesus' conversation with the Samaritan woman we learn that it is helpful to start where people are. Pay attention to their needs, their struggles, and their worries about the future. Often it helps to basically start out by listening to them. Then we share our testimony about how we came to have a personal experience of salvation and how this helps us to have a sense of peace in our hearts about our eternal future, and an assurance that the Lord is with us in every experience we face in this life.

Another way to create an interest is to pray with and for our Catholic relatives and friends.

During my days as a seminary student, I was starting a church in a town nearby. One Saturday morning as I knocked on a door, a woman came out. I started out by saying: "I'm Daniel Sanchez, the pastor of the new Baptist church." "I'm Catholic," she interrupted. I smiled and said: "I know that you are Catholic, and I want to share with you that we are praying in our church for your two sons who are serving in the military in a war abroad." She then asked, "You are praying for my sons in your church?" When I said that we were, she invited me into her living room, where we conversed for a while about her worries related to her sons.

Before I left, I asked her, "Would it be okay if I pray for your sons?" She readily agreed. I started with the Lord's Prayer and she was repeating it with me. Then I went on to pray specifically for her sons — that the Lord would protect them and be with their mother who was so worried about them.

When I finished, there were tears in her eyes. She said, "What a beautiful prayer. Would you write it down for me?" She wanted to send the prayer to her sons.

Guess who was in church with us on Sunday.

Most Catholics are open to our ministering to them and praying for them. Many of them have never had the experience of someone mentioning their name and their need to God in prayer. These are ways in which we can create an interest in the message of salvation.

### *Concentrate on Salvation*

Jesus concentrated on salvation. In His conversation with the Samaritan woman, Jesus did not focus on religion but on relationship. When she asked Jesus about where people should worship (John

4:19-24), He could have gotten into a long discussion refuting the religious practices of the Samaritan religion. (For example, the Samaritans asserted that Abraham had offered his son Isaac in their mountain, Gerizim. They were wrong; it was in Mount Moriah in Jerusalem.) But Jesus did not spend his time arguing about religion; instead, He focused on relationship. He said, “A time is coming when you will worship the father neither in this mountain nor in Jerusalem” (v. 21). Then He explained that true worship is based on a proper relationship with God. He said: “God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and in truth” (v. 24 ESV).

One of the worst mistakes that people can make in witnessing to Catholics is to get into arguments about religion. Some focus on trying to prove that Catholics are wrong. While it is true that in the discipleship process we need to focus on what the Bible says about some Catholic teachings and practices, in the evangelism stage we need to focus on relationship. Let us keep in mind that when the Philippian jailer asked Paul and Silas, “What must I do to be saved?,” they did not get into a long argument about the jailer's religious beliefs and traditions. Instead, they said: “Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved” (Acts 16:31). As I pointed out earlier, I responded to the woman who asked me about the differences between evangelicals and Catholics by focusing on what we had in common and quickly went from there to her relationship with Jesus Christ as her personal Savior. Remember, do not focus on religion but on relationship.

### *Communicate Patiently*

Reading the entire dialog that Jesus had with the Samaritan woman makes it clear that Jesus communicated patiently. In John 4:15 it is evident that at that point she still did not understand the message that Jesus was communicating to her. When she said, “Give me this water so that I won't get thirsty and have to keep coming here to draw water,” she was still thinking about physical water. This was after Jesus had spoken to her about the water that will “become in

them a spring of water welling up to eternal life.” (v.14) Instead of being impatient, Jesus continued to share the message of salvation patiently.

The manner in which the Samaritan woman referred to Jesus during their conversation reveals how she was progressively coming to a clearer understanding of who Jesus was. First, she referred to him as a “Jew” (v. 9). This indicates that she perceived him as a member of a race that hated Samaritans. The fact that she was startled that he spoke to her indicates that there was a social and religious distance. But before long she addressed him as “Sir” (v. 11). This indicates that she was beginning to develop a sense of respect for this stranger talking to her. In verse 19, she refers to him as “a prophet” (v. 19). She was beginning to see him as a messenger of God and felt at liberty to ask him questions about how to worship God. Finally, she referred to him as “the Messiah” (v. 25). Jesus’ loving, patient manner enabled her to progress in her understanding of who Jesus really is.

## CONCLUSION

One of the challenges we face in sharing the good news of salvation with our dear relatives and friends is that many of them do not know who Jesus really is. Some think of Jesus as a baby in Mary’s arms. Others think of Jesus as a respected teacher. Still others think of Jesus as a dead Christ, as is portrayed in the crucifixes that Catholics wear around their necks. For some the Lenten season — and especially Good Friday — are special times in which they commemorate the death of Jesus. In some countries there are religious processions in which they carry statues of Christ on the cross. The very sad dimension of this is that they have not come to the point of having a relationship with the living Christ. They don’t have the assurance that their sins have been forgiven. They also don’t have the presence of the living Christ when they go through the trials of life. They are not sure where they are going to go when their lives on Earth come to an end.

This should motivate us to have a deep sense of compassion for our dear relatives, friends, and neighbors who cannot sing with the redeemed: “Because He lives I can face tomorrow, because He lives all fear is gone, because I know He holds the future, and life is worth the living just because He lives.”

How can we lead them to have this assurance about their eternal destiny? First of all, have a clear concept of what Jesus taught about the nature of salvation. He taught that salvation is a spiritual experience, that salvation is a gift from God, that salvation is attained through faith, and that we can have the assurance of our salvation. Secondly, follow the example of Jesus. Cultivate a friendship, create an interest, concentrate on salvation, and communicate patiently.

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# Church Planting in the Context of Orthodoxy

*Vasilica Croitor*

## INTRODUCTION

I suspect that of all the religions presented in this book, the faith that *theologically* is closest to the Evangelical faith is the one represented by the Orthodox church. Its general doctrines about God, the Trinity, creation, and eschatology — even about pneumatology — are quite compatible with what many evangelicals believe. However, when one ventures much beyond the fundamental doctrines of Christianity that we share in common, the two streams of Christianity take separate, and perhaps irreconcilable, roads.

The simplest definition of the Orthodox church is that it represents the communion of the churches that acknowledge the Patriarch of Constantinople and are recognized by him as well.<sup>1</sup>

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*Although there are many branches of Orthodoxy such as those found in Greece, Egypt, and Ethiopia, this Chapter on the Orthodox church is written from the perspective of Eastern Europe, particularly Romania.*

1 James J. Stamoolis, in *Three Views on Eastern Orthodoxy and Evangelicalism* (2004). This definition is debatable now, because in a recent rift in Orthodoxy a significant number of national churches separated themselves from Patriarch Bartolomeu.

Orthodoxy is one of the three major branches of Christianity, along with Catholicism and Protestantism. The Eastern Orthodox Church is the third largest Christian church in the world, claiming a membership of approximately 230 million members or 10% of all Christians.

Most Orthodox believers live in formerly Communist countries. There are an estimated 100 million in Russia, 35 million in Ukraine, 19 million in Romania, and 10 million in Greece. Since the time of the Byzantine Empire, smaller communities have continued to exist in Africa, in the eastern Mediterranean region, and in the Middle East; in those regions, the only significant Orthodox community that survived over the ages is the Ethiopian church, which has 35 million adherents. Smaller numbers of Orthodox believers are scattered in other parts of the world; most are migrants and their descendants. The growth of the Orthodox church through missionary effort is almost unnoticeable. Interest in evangelism is expressed more loudly when the Orthodox are a minority. For example, the website of The Orthodox Church in America declares: “The Mission of The Orthodox Church in America, the local autocephalous Orthodox Christian Church, is to be faithful in fulfilling the commandment of Christ to “Go into all the world and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit...”<sup>2</sup>

Historically, the Orthodox church became a separate entity after the Great Schism in 1054. Both Catholics and Orthodox will claim that they remained the true church, while the other one is the schismatic — or heretic — church. While over the years since, the Catholic church developed a great willingness to accept that there is salvation in other Christian churches (and even in non-Christian churches!), the Orthodox church maintains an exclusivist view that all churches must *return* to orthodoxy in order to be saved. For example, an Orthodox priest can be excommunicated if he participates

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2 [The Orthodox Faith - Orthodox Church in America \(oca.org\)](http://oca.org) Accessed on November, 17, 2020.

in a communion service in a non-Orthodox Church. At the highest level, the Orthodox church maintains that any teaching other than Orthodox doctrine is a heresy. This makes the Orthodox the most fundamentalist movement within Christianity, and the one least willing to change.

The national Orthodox churches are organized as *autocephalous* churches (independent of external authorities). Each one is led by a patriarch or a bishop. The Patriarch of Constantinople (today's Istanbul) is considered the leader of the Orthodox community worldwide, though his role is more that of a moderator. Many conflicts have taken place between these national churches, a notable one being the greatest schism that took place in Orthodoxy very recently, in 2018, when the Ukrainian church broke away from Russia. The lack of unity in the Orthodox world was also very visible in 2016 in the last failed attempt to organize a Pan-Orthodox Council, something that has not taken place for centuries. After a lot of effort to bring all the churches around the table, five of the national Orthodox churches (representing two-thirds of the world's Orthodox believers) declined the invitation.

## THE BELIEFS OF THE ORTHODOX CHURCH

It is necessary from the beginning to make a clear-cut distinction between the theology of the Orthodox church and the popular theology that is followed by its adherents. It is the popular theology that shapes Orthodox people's lives and the way they relate to God. The popular faith of the masses will be discussed later in this chapter. First, we must lay out the theological foundation of the Orthodox doctrines as they are presented in official catechism manuals. The Orthodox church's theological views and practices are not based solely on Scripture. They are based on sources external to the Bible, and in many instances those sources contradict it.

### *The Bible and “the Tradition”*

While Evangelicals uphold the Bible as the only infallible authority, Orthodox Christians have built their faith on two sources: the Bible plus “the Holy Tradition.” It may come as a shock to Evangelicals to hear some Orthodox theologians claim that their Tradition is even higher than Scripture! They argue that the Tradition existed before the biblical canon was completed and approved by the church in the fourth century, and therefore the Tradition has authority over Scripture, to interpret and apply it.

Although the Bible was compiled after *some* of the traditions were established, this interpretation fails to acknowledge that the New Testament books were all completed before the last apostle passed away. The oral period of the church did not exceed more than 30 to 35 years. The apostle Paul was aware that he was writing the Scriptures when he was sending some of his letters, thus laying down the foundation of the faith. Subsequently, Christians who were looking for direction in their lives were very dependent on the written Word of God. The church was closely following the words of Jesus and of the apostles from the very beginning. Yes, centuries later there was an official debate about which books should be included in the canon (as a response to Marcion, who rejected some books), but the Bible existed and was widely present in the early church long before the canon was officially established.

### *What Exactly Is the Tradition?*

In practical terms, the Tradition is a collection of teachings and practices that evolved through the centuries and now guides Orthodox worship, theology, and ecclesiology, as well as the daily life of believers. The Orthodox church calls the Tradition the “living life of the Church.” So, the living church is the cradle of the Tradition, and the Bible was also produced by the church.

## Tradition in Judaism

It is important to remember that the same approach was utilized in Judaism before Jesus. Various Jewish sects created their own “holy” tradition and placed it above the Word of God. Jesus confronted the leaders of His time for abandoning the Word of God while favoring the man-made traditions, “thus making void the word of God by your tradition that you have handed down” (Mark 7:13 ESV). With irony He rebuked them for the subtle way in which they twisted the Word of God: “You have a fine way of rejecting the commandment of God in order to establish your tradition!” (v. 9 ESV).

Unfortunately, the church took the same path as another tradition was placed above the Word of God, departing from the original words of Jesus. As a joint commission of representatives of the Orthodox and Lutheran churches put it in the late twentieth century, “The orthodox church maintains that an authentic interpretation is the job of the Church Fathers, expressed in the decisions of the ecumenic councils.”<sup>3</sup>

When the Reformation emphasized the return to Scripture (the *sola Scriptura* principle), the main objective was not to throw away all the centuries of the church history and invite individual interpretation. The reformers respected the centuries of biblical interpretation and the creeds of the church, but they had to resist the unbiblical and heretical traditions that had been added to church doctrines. In other words, because tradition can deviate from the truth and can alter doctrine, it must be subjected to the Word of God.

## The Way of Salvation

Most religions preach a way of salvation, an endeavor to recon-

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3 Lutheran World Federation Lutheran-Orthodox Dialogue: Agreed Statements 1985-1989, [https://www.lutheranworld.org/sites/default/files/1985-1987-1989-Lutheran\\_Orthodox\\_Dialogue-EN.pdf](https://www.lutheranworld.org/sites/default/files/1985-1987-1989-Lutheran_Orthodox_Dialogue-EN.pdf) p. 26.

nect people with God.<sup>4</sup> How that is achieved is what differentiates the religions. For the Orthodox believer, salvation is attained in a mix of faith and personal works. Entrance into the church takes place early in life through baptism by water administered to infants, which is considered to be the new spiritual birth of an individual: “Through the mystery of baptism Christ comes to dwell in us and we are born again to a new life of holiness.”<sup>5</sup>

The born-again experience at the time of infant baptism is not so much connected with receiving salvation, but rather a covering of the original sin. One thing is sure: the new birth is not a saving experience, because salvation must be attained through a process in which humans play a significant role.

The divine wisdom decided that it is not right to remove all traces of the fall and the salvation to be offered totally free, but it considered that we should also make our contribution in attaining it. The appropriation of salvation by the believers is called “subjective salvation” and is realized by grace, faith and good works.<sup>6</sup>

Since salvation is attained through that combined effort, one cannot say that one is saved. It is a lifelong process. The result will be known only on the day of judgement, based on one’s good works and the holiness one attained. Salvation is through Christ, but transformation is realized by an individual’s will, with the help of God.

In the Orthodox church, the process of salvation is encapsulated in the concept of *theosis*, the process of a worshiper becoming free of sin and being united with God. According to this definition, the process of theosis corresponds to the glorification stage from Reformed theology.

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4 The Latin term religion is derived from re- (again) + ligo “bind, connect”

5 “Mitropolia Ardealului”, 1973, nr. 11-12, p. 991.

6 Nicolae, The Metropolitan of Banat, *Invățătura ortodoxă despre mântuire*, Timișoara, 1983, p. 31-33. Translated to English.

The doctrine of theosis is based on the belief that human beings can reach union with God to such a degree that they will participate in the divine nature. St. Athanasius coined this concept with his famous words: “God became man so that men might become gods.”<sup>7</sup> In this line of thought, all creation was affected by the incarnation of Jesus. Matter became “good” when the Word became flesh. St. Maximos the Greek affirmed that people had the freedom of choice even after the fall and repentance remains a possibility even for the darkest hearts.

On the other hand, the concept of *justification by faith* lies at the core of the doctrine of salvation in the theology of the Reformation. Because Christians are justified by faith alone, salvation is not related to human works or merit, but through the work realized by Jesus at the cross.

Good works and practical holiness do not provide the grounds for acceptance with God. God receives as righteous those who believe, not because of any good thing He sees in them — not even because of His own sanctifying work in their lives — but solely on the basis of Christ’s righteousness, which is reckoned to their account. “To the one who does not work, but believes in him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is counted as righteousness” (Romans 4:5 ESV).<sup>8</sup>

## THE PRACTICES OF THE ORTHODOX CHURCH

As will be discussed in more detail later in this chapter, our theological roots that are based on the Nicene Creed are the same and can be supported entirely with the Bible. The Creed is an amazing theological résumé, but it lacks so much when it comes to practical living and the mission of the church. For example, what is the role of the Holy Spirit? Silence! The Creed gives us no clue, except a single

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<sup>7</sup> Sf. Atansie, *Cuvânt despre întruparea Cuvântului*, București, Ed. IBMBOR, 1987, 54. Translated to English.

<sup>8</sup> John MacArthur, <https://www.gty.org/library/articles/A194/justification-by-faith>, Accessed on November 18, 2020.



brief mention of that amazing person of the Trinity. But the practices of the Orthodox church get their inspiration from another source, the Holy Tradition. Most of them are just religious practices clothed in Christian motives.

The heart of the Christian faith is the personal relationship with the risen Savior that generates a transformed life. Jesus fulfilled the Old Testament sacrifices and expectations and, through his blood, inaugurated the new covenant. His sacrifice was offered once for all, therefore ending the old sacrifices and rituals. He called believers to worship God in Spirit and in truth, not tied to any ritual, place, or season.

The first generation of Christians experienced the power of the Gospel and maintained a strong commitment to the Word of God. Many suffered for their faith, including countless martyrs. But after the end of the persecution, when Christianity was officially accepted as a free religion and later was imposed as the only accepted religion in the Roman Empire, spirituality suffered a great decline.

The church was suddenly filled with people who had no personal relationship with Christ, who were not born again, but were rather interested in political gain if they would serve the new god proclaimed by the Emperor. Hailed by the Orthodox church, the Milano Edict of 313 had ended the persecution, but it opened the church to many people who were not born again and who were not ready to align their worldview with the Christian faith.

### *Icons*

It is hard to say when icons were first used in worship, but it is clear that for centuries there was resistance in the church to this practice. The tension led to a great controversy that was settled in favor of icons in the eighth century, at the Seventh Orthodox Synod in 787.

It is interesting that Orthodox theology accepted veneration of icons, considering that Orthodoxy leans so much on the Old Testament, which starting with the Ten Commandments is very explicit in prohibiting any representation of God in worship. If there was a time when people needed some sort of images to enhance their worship, it was the Old Testament era, when there was no direct work of the Spirit in the believer's life, the revelation of God was very limited, and there was constant pressure by all the other nations for the Jews to show them their God. But the Old Testament left no room for icons or statues, and the New Testament explains that worship will no longer focus on holy places and rituals but on communion with God through the Holy Spirit.

The most common way the Orthodox justify the practice is to say that people do not worship the icon, but the one *represented* on the icon. But the second commandment is quite specific, excluding even prostration before an image:

You shall not make for yourself an image in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below. You shall not bow down to them or worship them. (Exodus 20:4-5)

Orthodox theologians insist that there is a difference between veneration (*prokynesis*) and worship (*latreia*). Yet, this is a distinction that common believers cannot make. Actual practice shows clearly that people worship and put their trust in icons, as well as in relics and other holy objects.

### *The Intercession of the Saints*

Huge processions centered on the remains of some allegedly saintly people who lived in previous ages take place every year in the Orthodox world. In a country like Romania, people literally are ready to step on each other to get closer to the box and touch, just for a second, the objects which belonged to the saint or that part of

the saint's body that was preserved.

Orthodox tradition has promoted the mother of Jesus to a position that has no biblical support. Actually, it goes against the early documents of the church, like the creeds. Since the Orthodox church regards the role of Tradition so highly, one might wonder why the Nicene Creed treats Mary with such simple words: "...[Jesus] by the Holy Spirit was incarnate of the Virgin Mary, and became man."

In every liturgy in the Orthodox church, the priest asks God the Father to accept "the prayers and the intercession" of all the saints who now live in heaven.

### *Holy Buildings*

The buildings owned by the church are regarded as holy in themselves. People treat them with veneration. For example, many monasteries are circumnavigated multiple times by people who walk on their knees, causing them pain and injuries. They do so in the belief that their sins will be forgiven because of the respect they show in that type of worship.

### *Liturgy*

Orthodox liturgy is fascinating to some Western Christians who are disappointed by the superficial "show" type of churches that have emerged in the last generation.

The structure and imagery of the liturgy is rooted in the Old Testament template but clothed with New Testament elements and language. The candles, the incense, the priestly garments, the altar, the golden objects, and so on are all reutilized in Orthodox churches. There is very little room for participation by believers, and no spontaneity. No musical instruments are used in the churches.

## *Clergy*

The Orthodox church maintains a strict hierarchy and claims that priestly anointing was passed on from generation to generation. They insist that apostolic succession is the guarantee that the Orthodox church is the main church, although over the church's history some of the patriarchs or bishops have drifted into heresy and made decisions that were not in the church's interests. Even now, more than half of the Orthodox churches are no longer in good standing with the Patriarch of Constantinople, while many priests have ceased to mention their own Patriarch because they disagree about several areas of church authority.

Apostolic succession has, nevertheless, been a major emphasis in the Orthodox church. Because the liturgy focuses so much on the sacraments, a key requirement is that the priest in charge be a successor of the apostles of Jesus. Apostolic succession is more important than the personal qualifications or the spirituality of the priest administering the sacraments. Even if a priest were living in open sin, this would not invalidate his ministry as long as he was in the historical apostolic lineage.

According to the New Testament, Jesus fulfilled all the aspects of the Old Testament priesthood, and he inaugurated another era for God's people in which all the believers become priests. There is no succession needed, as it was in the Old Testament with the tribes of priests or Levites — but there is a spiritual bond of unity with Christ, through the Spirit. All those who are born from the Spirit are children of God.

The Reformation called the church to shift its attention from the apostolic succession to the apostolic way of life. We can see from the Old Testament that renewal was possible when the people of God rediscovered their moral and spiritual fervor.

Jesus told the Pharisees of his time that if they were the children of Abraham (and there is no doubt that they were in the line of Abraham) they would be doing the works of Abraham.

### *The Church and the State*

The Orthodox church maintains very close ties with the political power in all the countries in which a majority of the population is Orthodox. The catchphrase *Byzantine symphony* describes the way in which the church and the state are singing the same melody, just with different instruments. In Romania, for example, important politicians are also members of the National Church Assembly, a gathering that elects the new patriarch and makes other important decisions for the church.

In Romania, the Patriarch Miron Cristea, who was enthroned as the first Patriarch of the Romanian Orthodox Church in 1925, accepted appointment as Prime Minister of Romania during the dictatorial reign of King Carol II, who banned all political parties in 1938. *Time* magazine called Cristea “the puppet Premier” of Carol II.<sup>9</sup>

In other Orthodox countries such as Greece, the separation between church and state is not even mentioned in the Constitution, which leaves the door open for anything. Here is *The Financial Times'* Moscow correspondent's recent description of how the relationship between church and state is manifested in the country with the largest Orthodox population, Russia:

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9 [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Patriarch\\_Miron\\_of\\_Romania#cite\\_note-time24apr-18](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Patriarch_Miron_of_Romania#cite_note-time24apr-18)

Kirill, in black robes and a gold-embroidered white headdress adorned with a cross, thanked God and “especially you, Vladimir Vladimirovich [Putin]...for this dialogue between church and state” during his time as patriarch. “I would even dare say that church and state have such relations for the first time in all the history of Russia.... Even in the times of the Russian empire, the church did not have an equal partner in the face of the government.”<sup>10</sup>

When Jesus announced His ministry on earth as well as His eschatological hope for the end-times, the establishing of God’s Kingdom, He announced that there will be a new people, the people of God. All nationalities are invited to be a part of the new kingdom, but His kingdom is meant to be above any human rule. There cannot be a one-to-one partnership between the church and an earthly kingdom.

## HOW TO REACH ORTHODOX BELIEVERS

It is important to remember that most of the Orthodox and Post-Communism countries spent decades under Communist rule. Some have spent 45 years under aggressive atheism, and others even 70 years. Churches were demolished, priests were imprisoned, and religious views were attacked daily in schools and universities by official atheist propaganda. In those countries you can find people whose families have been atheistic for three generations. Yet, surprisingly, some of those people have no problem in identifying themselves as Orthodox while doubting the very existence of God. Therefore, before entering a conversation about faith, it is important to assess where they really stand in relationship with God, or who they call God.

Because of that context, a church planter should start every conversation with a clear distinction in mind: there are many types of Orthodox, and people who describe themselves that way range

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<sup>10</sup> Mac Seddon, “Putin and the Patriarchs,” *The Financial Times* (2019). *Financial Times*, August 21, 2019. <https://www.ft.com/content/a41ed014-c38b-11e9-a8e9-296ca66511c9>

from nominal (even non-believing!) to radical, extremist Orthodox believers.

### *Reaching Nominal Members of the Orthodox Church (Non-Practicing Orthodox)*

Since nominal, non-practicing individuals make up the largest group within the Orthodox ranks, we will discuss this at length. I live in Romania, a country that boasts a vast majority of Orthodox believers (over 87% of the population), but I am stunned by the ignorance that most people manifest about their faith. Once I conducted a street interview before Easter for a Christian radio station, and I approached the people passing by with the following question: "What do we celebrate at Easter?" Although the interviews took place in the area that is considered to be the heart of Romanian Orthodoxy, an area with gorgeous monasteries and a high rate of church attendance, the respondents were plainly ignorant. Many had no clue. Others guessed that it could be about the birth of Jesus or the ascension of his mother, Mary!

The problem with the Orthodox church is that it cannot deliver what it promises. The large masses of believers are not led to experience the life that the church proclaims. They are simply nominal believers. The Lausanne Movement for World Evangelism has crafted a definition of the nominal believer:

A nominal Christian is a person who has not responded in repentance and faith to Jesus Christ as his personal Savior and Lord. He is a Christian in name only. He may be very religious. He may be a practicing or non-practicing church member. He may give intellectual assent to basic Christian doctrines and claim to be a Christian. He may be faithful in attending liturgical rites and worship services, and be an active member involved in church affairs. But in spite of all this, he is still destined for eternal judgment because he has not committed his life to Jesus Christ.<sup>11</sup>

Nominal Orthodox Christians do not seek a personal connection with Christ or his Word. Their values are not rooted in loving God and submitting to His authority, but in religious rituals. For them, attending church ceremonies on holidays like Easter and Christmas is what is important. I have heard it put it this way: in order to be saved, one must make sure not to miss the three essential church events of life: infant baptism, wedding, and funeral. This is a very convenient, cheap way of sorting out life's difficult questions.

The outcome of nominal Orthodox Christianity is the belief that one is saved simply by being part of the church. People's hope is that the church, the saints, and Mother Mary will somehow intercede and make it possible for them to be saved. This false assurance requires much less than what the law-abiding Jews were following in the time of Jesus. Instead of keeping the law of the Old Covenant or bearing the cross of self-denial from the New Covenant, nominal Christianity offers the cheap route of rituals and sacraments.

It is understandable, then, that the church does not put an emphasis on catechism, Bible reading, or Christian education. People don't feel the need for them. All attempts to revive the life of the believers were met with fierce opposition and their proponents were either suppressed or kicked out of the church.<sup>11</sup> It is unheard of in the Orthodox world to have any movement like charismatic Orthodoxy or other forms of renewal.

Obviously, there are nominal Christians in most branches of Christianity. But nominal Orthodox believers are somehow the most disadvantaged, for a number of reasons:

- The secular mindset has been developed by atheistic regimes, while the church had no means for mass catechism while it operated underground.

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<sup>11</sup> An example is the story of the Lord's Army, the largest renewal movement that the Orthodox church was faced with. Its founding leader, Father Iosif Trifa (1888-1938), was excommunicated and after his death the church did not allow the burial service to proceed until his dead body was stripped of his priestly garments.



- The church's superstitions and the dogmas create a thick veil against the knowledge of God that is impenetrable by the simple believer.
- There are even priests, who are expected to be more pious than the average adherent, who are more non-believing than faithful believers.<sup>12</sup>
- The church does not run programs aimed at revitalizing nominal believers and is opposed to any form of renewal.
- Most of the Orthodox live in countries that have very few born-again believers, so there are fewer chances that they will meet a Bible-believing, professing Christian.
- The hierarchy of the Orthodox church has promoted an antagonistic spirit against other Christian denominations.

## BEST PRACTICES IN REACHING NOMINAL ORTHODOX ADHERENTS

### *Incarnational Evangelism*

Confrontational evangelism will not work in reaching the Orthodox population simply because most are not interested, or have been warned against associating with evangelical Protestants. They already see non-Orthodox people as strange (both bizarre and foreign to their culture and nation). Spreading pamphlets and preaching on the street through loudspeakers are not ways to attract their interest.

However, approaching nominal Orthodox Christians with genu-

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<sup>12</sup> In 2019 a priest published an embarrassing book, *The Confession of an Atheist Priest*. In it he explains that within the church it is not possible to go beyond superstition, dogma, and institutionalized religion. After publishing the book he resigned from the priesthood.

ine love and care will open the door to share with them about the true God. They are a friendly people and they value personal relationship. Bear in mind that the Orthodox and Post-Communist world is less individualistic than Western societies. The conception of the breadth of family, household, or community — the *oikos* — is much larger and more welcoming. Networks of friends and acquaintances are extensive, because that was a way of survival under Communism, when people helped each other to cope with the severe restrictions.

So, instead of preaching and debating with an Orthodox person about faith and God, just take time in the beginning to be with them and to be there for them. If you are a missionary from the Western world, you are already a point of attraction. They love to talk with people from the countries that they see in the movies! You will get invited into their homes, and be invited to special events. That way you can win their trust.

### *Be Open About Your Faith*

You don't have to hide your faith and values, as is often required in closed Muslim countries. It is okay for people in Orthodox cultures to know that you are a Bible-professing believer, that you take your faith seriously, and that you find joy in serving God.

### *Share Your Testimony*

Personal conversations are the most practical, efficient way to share the gospel. When sharing one's personal testimony, it is important to emphasize the turning point in your life — what made a difference in your conversion. Many times, people from the West tend to neglect that, because they live in a culture where people know more about God and church, so when they realize that they are lost, they know where to turn for answers. The Orthodox need to hear what the process was. What is repentance? Why did you choose that path? How did you experience God? Don't just tell them

how bad your life was and how good it became after you received Jesus. They are familiar to some degree with the stories of religious people, so they will pay attention to how you encountered God.

### *Answer Questions*

They might have a false feeling of religious security, but they have questions that their religiosity will not answer. When you start sharing about answered prayer, about how God is directing your life, about the hope that you have, and so on, many will want to hear.

### *Make a Clear Presentation of the Gospel*

An Orthodox nominal Christian will most likely lack a good understanding of one or more of these areas of the Gospel:

- *The reality of sin and its consequences.* They know that sin is bad, but they don't know in what way sin affects their life and their relationship with God.
- *A personal relationship with a Savior.* The construct that they have about God is far from the beautiful relationship presented in the gospels. Used to hearing a works-based salvation message, it is hard for the Orthodox mindset to understand that God wants to know us intimately. (This concept is especially despised by Orthodox leaders, who think that God cannot be known in that way.)
- *The Lordship of Jesus Christ.* Many nominal Orthodox Christians are happy to offer alms to God, to help the poor, and to attend some church services from time to time, but they have no clue what it means to submit to the Lordship of Christ. This is probably the most frustrating aspect of sharing the gospel with a nominal Orthodox believer. They will agree with everything that you are showing them from the Word, but they will be reluctant to take that radical step of personal obedience. They are

particularly reluctant to accept water baptism, which is a clear indicator of their lack of commitment.

- *The revelation from the Word of God.* Even a nominal Orthodox Christian may have a Bible in their home, but they may regard it simply as a religious artifact. Help them see it as a treasure of wisdom and healing for their soul. Share how the Word is working in your daily devotional life. They are used to thinking that only priests and saints can understand the Bible.

## BEST PRACTICES TO REACH CULTURAL OR NATIONALISTIC NOMINAL ORTHODOX ADHERENTS

As was mentioned earlier, the Orthodox churches promote a strong nationalism in the countries where they hold a majority. National identity is linked to the Orthodox religion, making the two inseparable. As a result, to change your faith is to betray your nationality — and if you do so, you merit being ostracized by your fellow countrymen.

In such a context, it is common to encounter practicing believers who are attached to their faith because of a cultural or national emphasis and not because of a genuine relationship with God.

### *Saul the Zealot*

Saul the Pharisee had a great zeal for the faith of his fathers, to the point that he was willing to kill in the name of his religion, thinking that he was doing it for God. Although this example may sound extreme, there are historical instances of a radical spirit manifested in the Orthodox church. For example, the history of Romania, has had the experience of an Orthodox nationalistic militia called The Legion.<sup>13</sup> The mixture of faith and nationalism can be very dangerous.

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13 The Legion of the Archangel Michael was active between 1920 and 1941, when

When reaching out to Orthodox adherents who combine the two, it is necessary to offer them biblical examples that neutralize the *exceptionalism* of national pride — the idea that their nation is somehow favored over other nations. The Bible presents in detail a vision of a God who loves the whole world and wants to save people from all nations. Telling the stories of how God provided for all people and how the gospel can transform all nations can be very effective. People also need to realize that all nations have significant flaws and they all have fallen short of God’s standard.

For example, in Orthodox countries, abortion is a real issue. One reason is that Communism made all abortions illegal, so women who were looking for an abortion went about it in dangerous, non-medical ways. After the fall of Communism, people associated that interdiction with Communism. Abortion is now seen as a sign of freedom. Other areas of concern include corruption, domestic violence, and the abuse of alcohol. Mentioning these, the Prime Minister of Romania emphasized the power of the gospel to bring transformation to the nation, then the conversation can have a positive tone.

When Jesus reached out to the nationalistic, zealous crusader Saul, He gave him a mission that surpassed his narrow vision: to preach the Gospel to the Gentiles. He would even do it in front of the rulers of those nations. God is not scared by the nationalistic turn that people have put to religion; He can easily transform them and put a love for all people in the hearts that He touches with His power.

### *The Samaritan Woman*

Maybe the best approach to reaching people who profess a faith

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Romania’s General Antonescu, with the backing of Hitler, threw the Legion out of power. The Legion was infused with Christian faith and was structured along the lines of a religious/spiritual movement, not as a political movement.

that is based on a cultural or national emphasis is to present to them the benefits of the new life in Christ. It is very hard to try to explain to them why it is wrong to wave the flag of nationalism. Instead, life in Christ is something we can boast about! We have the treasures of heaven in our earthly vessels, and we can never go wrong when we share with people what God offers to His children, regardless of their nationality, color, or race.

A conversation about the riches of the gospel can be developed progressively, or in a more striking way like Jesus did with the Samaritan woman. One can only imagine her countenance when she heard that Jesus was able to offer a miraculous water that would cancel her thirst forever! Like the Samaritan woman, people in the Orthodox faith are preoccupied with their national worship, which they consider the right way to approach God. They will easily jump to questions about places, rituals, saints of the past, or the best priest of the present. Our mission is to lead them to discover Jesus and His gift of a new life, so that they will be ready to embrace that gift of life.

### *The Difference between Religion and Trust in Jesus*

Here is an area that Westerners usually approach in a way that is counterintuitive. While they try to tell people that religion will not save anyone — that it is the opposite of believing, that it is the human response, and so on — they discover that their Orthodox friend will not follow their advice, but rather will get more radical in their national and cultural faith.

The reason is that for Orthodox believers, the word religion is not negative. For them, to be *religious* is to be devoted, to be virtuous, and to love and serve God. In reality, they might be very far from knowing God, like Saul (but he was so devoted to his religion that I doubt that he would have taken the advice of a missionary who told him that his Mosaic religion could not save him). Since the word *religion* is so dear to them, a different approach needs to

be taken. That was Paul's method in Athens, when he commended them for their devotion (to an unknown idol!) and then went on to present Jesus to them. Let your Orthodox friends know — even as they follow the religious rituals because they are respecting the faith of their parents and country — that you appreciate the fact that they are respectful and pious persons. Help them to know that God has wonderful gifts ready for them. At this point, the story of Cornelius provides a powerful tool for evangelizing. Cornelius had all that, but he missed the best — the transformation that the gospel offers. And that is the story of many Orthodox adherents.

### *Reaching Genuine Orthodox Believers*

It is without question that among Orthodox adherents, genuine believers are the most open to the gospel. But they can be alienated very easily if you don't approach them with the right attitude and the proper message. The New Testament shows us that the people who were closest to the Kingdom often were the ones who missed it completely. It was the people who were on the margins, those whom the religious institutions of that day regarded as completely lost, were the first to receive new life. Therefore, we must be aware that although religious people are very informed about spirituality and have some degree of devotion to God, they can be harder to reach. This is why a church planter must be especially well equipped when trying to reach genuine Orthodox believers with the gospel.

### *Obstacles to Faith*

First, we must identify the main stumbling blocks that prevent them from coming to Jesus.

### *False Security*

While much energy is spent in the Orthodox world on liturgy,

rituals, and processions, very little is directed towards catechism (teaching) and the individuals' spiritual growth. This is largely due to the misconception that in the end, it is the church that takes care of one's salvation. In this way of thinking, if a person is baptized as a child and receives an Orthodox funeral at the end of his life (which includes many prayers for forgiveness of the deceased person), then he will be saved.

For centuries, the Orthodox church restricted peoples' access to the Bible, hoping that they would gain an understanding of the Bible's message from religious symbols. The hope was that through the church's liturgy filled with complex symbolism, people would be drawn to God. The reality is that when people enter a church building and attend a liturgy to which they cannot relate, they become more disconnected from a personal relationship with Christ.

### False Teachings

The life of the Orthodox believer is centered on practices that are far from the teaching of the Bible. It is hard to imagine that someone who reads the Bible carefully would come to any of these assumptions:

- We must worship God through icons, a way of enhancing the faith.
- We must pray and make benevolence on behalf of the people who are dead; benevolence services are to take place 7 days, 40 days, and 6 months after the funeral.
- Mary is the main intercessor in heaven for the church and she is more approachable than Jesus.
- The saints are the protectors of the believers, so we must pray to them.
- Pilgrimages to monasteries and worshipping the bones of the saints are pleasing acts of devotion to God.
- There are many wonder-working icons and religious artifacts.



Believers must show their devotion to God by using those elements in their worship.

### *Trust in Human Works*

Sincere believers are misled to put their hope in their human works, a concept that goes against the whole thrust of New Testament teaching. It is very hard to explain to a devoted Orthodox believer why good works are not God's way of saving people. Their whole religious paradigm is built on "working your salvation" — earning it through prayer, fasting, and virtues. The way to heaven is described in the Orthodox church as a ladder from earth to heaven. The believer is making his way up to heaven through acquiring new virtues. "According to the Church Fathers, Christ has opened the possibility of salvation, but he did not save us, for the salvation is the outcome of the co-working of men with the uncreated Grace of the Holy Spirit."<sup>14</sup>

Only the day of judgement will reveal who will be saved, according to the Orthodox church. There is no guarantee of salvation before that, because all the works of the believer will be evaluated at the judgement. Although Orthodox teachers use the word *grace* a lot, it is used to compensate for the fact that people's works have fallen short of God's standard. Works are said to play an essential role in receiving salvation.

### *Hardened Hearts*

The religious spirit that drives many devoted Orthodox Christians grabs their hearts and minds and leaves no room for doubting anything that the official doctrine of the church says. As a result, many of those who were born again and left the Orthodox church

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14 Matei Vulcănescu, "Există mântuire în afara Bisericii Ortodoxe?" ["Is There Salvation Outside the Orthodox Church?"] (2019), [www.marturisireaortodoxa.ro/exista-mantuire-inafara-bisericii-ortodoxe-sunt-martirii-eterodocsilor-martiri-adevarati-pentru-hristos/](http://www.marturisireaortodoxa.ro/exista-mantuire-inafara-bisericii-ortodoxe-sunt-martirii-eterodocsilor-martiri-adevarati-pentru-hristos/)

have suffered physical and verbal abuse.

It is sad to witness that in many instances, sincere people were brainwashed to believe that the only true religion in the world is their faith. They are taught to reject any conversation with a Protestant, not to enter their churches, and not to sit at their tables or read their literature.

## **BEST PRACTICES IN REACHING GENUINE ORTHODOX BELIEVERS**

In spite of all these aspects that make it hard to reach Orthodox believers, there are many bridges that help us share the gospel with them.

### *The Nicene Creed*

The Nicene Creed creates a great opportunity for Evangelicals to connect with Orthodox believers, for two reasons. First, there is no disagreement about the acceptance of the Creed on either side. Second, it is something that most Orthodox believers know by heart and recite during every liturgy. When in dialogue with an Orthodox Christian, it is important to make clear that you appreciate the Creed and agree with every single statement in it.

In the countries in Eastern Europe and elsewhere in which the Orthodox make up the majority of the population, people are taught that all other Christian denominations are dangerous sects or cults. That instills fear and discourages people from any normal relationship with evangelicals. Telling them that you believe every statement of the Nicene Creed is a great bridge builder.

This important confession of faith was adopted at the First Council of Nicaea (325) and was revised at the First Council of Constantinople (381). It is a permanent part of the liturgy in all the Orthodox churches, as well as in many Reformed traditions. This text is so

well received by Christians of different traditions because it is an early document that was produced by the first few generations of Christians. As the old saying goes, “the water is clearer as you go upstream, towards its source.”

The Creed contains the essential elements of the Christian faith:

- The Trinity
- The Creation
- The divine and human nature of Christ
- The sacrificial death of Christ
- The Kingdom of God
- The role of the Holy Spirit
- The role of the church
- The baptism of forgiveness of sins
- The eschatological hope of the church

An unlimited number of conversations can start here. Using the Creed as a launchpad will build people’s confidence and encourage them to think for themselves, to read the corresponding Bible passages, to search the Scriptures, and to understand what the foundations of their faith are. And that will lead the conversations to the Bible.

### *The Bible*

Orthodox believers are taught that they should follow their spiritual guides’ instructions in all aspects of their faith. Any doubts, any questions, anything that bothers them must be presented to their confidant, who will offer guidance. Reading the Bible is not among the tasks recommended to believers.

Starting from the Creed makes it easier to draw their attention to the source of the Creed — to the richness of the Word of God. Bear in mind that many need to be introduced to the Bible for the first time. They might be as ignorant as a non-Christian about the books of the Bible, the chapter divisions, and what timespans are reflected in the Old and New Testaments.

It is better at this moment not to insist on auxiliary materials for Bible study, because the Orthodox can be afraid of using any “secular” materials. Just help them to get acquainted with the Bible and teach them how to read it for their devotions. They might need a more contemporary translation.<sup>15</sup>

Once they are familiar with the Bible, you can lead them in a discovery of its teaching about important areas of the faith. Let the Holy Spirit guide them and speak to their hearts about how they should live.

### *The Love of God*

The spirit of religiosity that drives the Orthodox faith, like in all other legalistic systems, does not have a sound understanding of God’s love. They believe the love of God must be earned, and it is conditioned by so many aspects that it is not the kind of love of God expressed in the Bible. In the Orthodox worldview, what a Christian can hope for is the mercy of God, but not the love of God. This is why “Lord, have mercy on me” is the prayer used most often in the liturgy, by far.

The older son in the Parable of the Prodigal Son reflects the limited theological view of the Orthodox person about the love of God. Since legalism comes always with a large dose of judgmentalism, this parable is the best exposition of that spirit. The older son was embarrassed by the lavishness of his father’s love towards his other, broken son — who the older son assumed did not merit anything. That very assumption is what makes it difficult for the Orthodox to understand why legalism and human works are not the way to earn the love of God.

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15 A paraphrased version would not be recommended at this time. One of the ways in which the Orthodox Church is discouraging people from discussing God and faith with Protestants is by telling them that the Bibles Protestants use are falsified and cannot be trusted. An expanded version may be considered proof of that.

The discovery of God's love is not a response to an intellectual technique, but to a spiritual process guided by the Holy Spirit. The role of the church planter or evangelist is to point to the power of God's love, and trust that the Spirit will bring further illumination. But it is a great day when the believer learns that he is not under condemnation, that the price for his transgressions was paid in full, that he is adopted and sanctified just because God loved him through Christ.

### *The Problem of Sin*

Another common ground that we share with Orthodox people is the desire to live a pure life. The burden caused by sin leads sincere people to seek forgiveness. In the Orthodox church, forgiveness is offered by the priest, as a result of confession and of the fulfillment of the canons. The priest can prescribe all kinds of measures, such as refraining from communion, reciting prayers, prostration, fasting, and alms. The Canons of the Eastern Orthodox Church, which were developed over the centuries, cover all types of sins.

Make sure that you confess clearly all the sins, because forgiveness is granted by the priest only for the sins that he understood well. You must fast for 5 days before going to confession. And the day you go to confession, you must be fasting the whole day without any food or water.<sup>17</sup>

In his battle for purity, the Orthodox person is literally participating in a carnal fight against flesh and blood. There are many rules and regulations. For example, the canon indicates that for the sin of masturbation the person who committed it needs to spend the next 40 days with dry food only, and 100 prostrations to the ground in each of the 40 days.<sup>17</sup>

16 [https://adevarul.ro/locale/calarasi/15-reguli-stricte-spovedania-ortodoxa-e-sa-ti-no-tezi-exactitate-canonul-primit-preot-1\\_56387225f5eaafab2c42bfe3/index.html](https://adevarul.ro/locale/calarasi/15-reguli-stricte-spovedania-ortodoxa-e-sa-ti-no-tezi-exactitate-canonul-primit-preot-1_56387225f5eaafab2c42bfe3/index.html) Accessed on November 18, 2020.

17 <https://ortodoxiatinerilor.ro/sexualitate/masturbarea/17311-canon-pentru-pcatul-mastur->

To conquer sin, the believer has to ask for the prayers of the saints and Mary, but he is also expected to make special efforts of ascetism and punishing himself for what he has done wrong.

This fight against sin is a great conversation opener. We share in common the desire to overcome sin and to live a victorious, holy life. The Orthodox church has never adopted a liberal theology about sin, life, marriage, and sexuality. That may have generated an ecumenical bridge that exists between the Orthodox and Protestants in Eastern Europe. We have to work together to promote Christian values and that has won the appreciation of many in the society.

We have great news to share with our Orthodox friends and they need to hear it! When we present the gospel to them, the problem of sin is usually at the center of their interest. We can use the examples of two famous people who have something to say about the fight against sin: the apostle Paul and Martin Luther. Their biographies show how hard they fought against sin, doing all they could to earn salvation through the works of the flesh. Nevertheless, in spite of all their efforts and acts of penitence, they discovered that their bodies were under the power of a ferocious master who ruled from the inside.

Paul expressed concisely the feelings shared by all the people who are trying to fight sin through their own efforts or obedience to the law: "What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body that is subject to death?" (Romans 7:24).

Similarly, Luther tried hard to live a holy life. He concluded that the way to become truly righteous is to hate oneself and to wish to be damned, agreeing with the righteous God who condemns sinners. This promoted an experience of deep terror from which only

the true gospel of Jesus Christ could save him.<sup>18</sup>

Then came the revelation of God’s love for the sinner, and His remedy. For Paul, that is presented in Romans 8, a chapter that the Orthodox should come to discover and believe. For Luther, it came through reading Paul’s letter to the Romans. He concluded later that the discovery of Romans 8 completely changed the course of his life:

Jesus Christ, our God and Lord, died for our sins and was raised again for our justification. He alone is the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world, and God has laid on Him the iniquity of us all. All have sinned and are justified freely, without their own works and merits, by His grace, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, in His blood. This is necessary to believe. This cannot be otherwise acquired or grasped by any work, law or merit.

Although many Orthodox theologians condemn the Protestant theology of justification by faith and warn against it as a dangerous path to a careless life, most of the people in the Orthodox nations will agree in general that Evangelicals are living the most moral lives. This is the good news that the Orthodox friends long to hear: the power of sin can be broken through faith in Jesus and in dependence on the Holy Spirit. If we focus on methods to suppress the desires of the flesh, we can only aggravate the rule of sin in our lives.

In the Western world, where the Orthodox are a tiny minority, the worldview of Orthodox believers is that the other churches have a modified, marketed, shallow faith, while the Orthodox is the only true church — the original faith.

For centuries the Orthodox world has locked spiritual experiences behind a veil of mystical thinking. Church planting in the Orthodox world is the only way to reach and transform that culture,

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18 Phillip Cary, “Luther: Gospel, Law, and Reformation,” Eastern University course.

because it is the incarnation of a biblical lifestyle for the everyday believer. More biblical churches will mean more believers who are part of the society, who live missionally, who serve their neighbor, and who worship God in Spirit and truth. Such churches will become part of the missionary force, instead of a mere tradition that glorifies the past.

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What is the rank of the Orthodox church among the other branches of Christianity and what are the main regions where it is located?
2. History repeats itself. How were Jewish mistakes repeated in Christianity with regard to tradition?
3. What are the differences between *kenosis* and *justification by faith*?
4. What should be our emphasis when sharing Christ with a nominal, non-practicing Orthodox believer?
5. What should be our emphasis when sharing Christ with an Orthodox believer who is motivated by nationalism or cultural interest?
6. What should be our emphasis when sharing Christ with a devoted Orthodox believer?

## PERSONAL NOTES

*Please use this space for writing your own reflection or a prayer regarding the content of this chapter.*

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# Church Planting in the Context of Oral Cultures

*Teresa Janzen and Gary Teja*

## INTRODUCTION

An old man rose from the crowd and peered into the small black book. “Your God is a god of paper,” he said as he jabbed a calloused finger at the pages, “but my god is the god of the sun, rain, and wind.” This man weighed the words of the young preacher against what he experienced in the created world. His evaluation of the God in the small black book, even with talk of love and forgiveness, didn’t compare to the god who brought the rain.

It is no accident that God gave us the Bible as His written word. But what does this mean for the majority world whose primary means of communication is spoken, not written? Bible translators have grappled with this challenge for centuries, earnestly working to establish written Scripture for people groups who need it, while simultaneously tackling the issue of literacy with the newly developed text.

The modern orality movement seeks to go one step further by addressing communication needs of traditionally oral people *beyond*

the text. In other words, how do oral people groups learn, think, and process information — and how can we engage them in the truth of Scripture? As we consider church planting among people of an oral culture, this chapter responds to that question.

God has given us a Scripture that meets the needs of every culture, yet we often default to sharing the gospel in the same way we received it.

For example, those of us in a literate culture reason out ideals of morality and virtue as a response to our perception of justice and absolution. We tend to segregate the spiritual world from the physical, and attribute direct interaction between the two as miraculous or supernatural. Literate cultures tend to contemplate how and why God created the world, and individuals long to find his or her purpose and significance within the created world.

On the other hand, our friends in traditionally oral cultures see and experience the world around them in a tangible and interconnected way. They recognize the spiritual dimension of creation and accept it as just as concrete as the physical world. They are less concerned about *how* and *why* the world was created, and more interested in the facts that it *was* created and that mankind collectively fulfills an interactive role with creation. While many oral traditions have myths to answer the *why* questions, there isn't a strong emphasis on cause and effect. The focus is more on anecdotes illustrating relational impact rather than naturalistic discovery.

Both means of understanding the gospel are present throughout all of Scripture, and both can bring us to a relationship with the Creator of the universe who also gave us His written Word.

Some people like to point out that the Bible was originally delivered through spoken word, since few people could read at the time it was written. While it is true that spoken reading of the Word was an important component of the original delivery method of Scrip-

ture, God designed His Word to be written. The purpose of a written text was not to limit accessibility, but to preserve its accuracy and therefore its efficacy,<sup>1</sup> regardless of how the message is delivered.

While this chapter will discuss some broad definitions and generalizations regarding traditionally oral cultures and their textualized counterparts, the most important thing to remember is that there is tremendous diversity among oral people groups, just as there is among highly textual cultures. Oral cultures employ various non-verbal technologies to record and remember content, just as literate cultures also embrace spoken means of communication. Church planters need to recognize that there is no culture that is purely oral, nor strictly textual.

## WHAT IS AN ORAL CULTURE?

In our increasingly globalized world, it's difficult to define what is meant when referring to oral cultures. Walter Ong, one of the foremost secular experts in the study of orality, refers to primary oral cultures as those with little exposure to written text. The Christian orality movement<sup>2</sup> refers to oral learners as those whose primary mode of learning is through spoken word and experience rather than text. This definition would include modern digital/visual learners as well as learners with a low literacy ability and learners who simply prefer to learn orally.

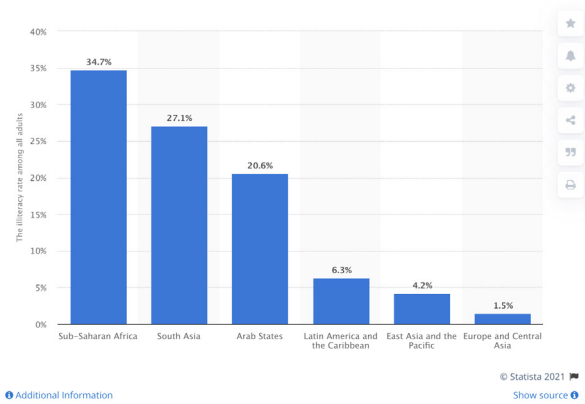
The challenge is that both of these definitions fall short of describing much of the world whose orality is not dictated by necessity nor preference, but rather by tradition and social structure. However, we can use literacy rates as an indicator of regions of the world where we might find oral traditional cultures.

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1 John 20:30-31.

2 *Webster's New World College Dictionary* defines *orality* as "reliance on spoken, rather than written, language for communication."

The illiteracy rate among adults (over 15-year-old) in 2019, by world region.



Source: Statista 2021

Oral tradition is based on relationships. After all, it takes two or more to communicate by speaking. This relational aspect of orality helps us understand why many oral traditional cultures are also group oriented cultures.

This relational aspect of oral cultures is foundational to the discussion of church planting among these people groups. Their worldviews and thought processes are very different from textualized societies', which has very little to do with an individual's literacy. A non-literate American adult may have a worldview similar to his literate neighbor. A Nigerian with a Ph.D. in philosophy may share common values with a non-literate tradesman in his city. This chapter addresses *traditionally oral cultures* — meaning people groups whose culture and worldview remain less impacted by extreme dependence on written text. This includes both educated literate people and non-literate people. Therefore, we will use the terms *oral tradition* or *traditionally oral* when referring to this audience.

## SPOKEN LANGUAGE

Every culture in the world has language. In all of them, language is spoken (except by the congenitally deaf). Ong reminds us that “oral expression can exist and mostly has existed without any writing at all, [but] writing never without orality.”<sup>3</sup> In fact, all writing systems are based on oral language, and they are eventually converted back to an oral format. Even reading becomes a form of oral expression, whether spoken aloud or in the mind.

Ethnologue, a leading Christian language research organization, reports that of the more than 10,000 languages that have existed, 7,117 spoken languages remain in use today. Of those, 3,982 have developed at least a written alphabet.<sup>4</sup> It is unknown, however, how many of those have a *functional* written language, or how many languages’ writing systems have been established purely for the purpose of Bible translation.<sup>5</sup> What we do know is that many of the world’s languages exist without a functional writing system that has developed to the point of influencing the people group’s worldview.

As an illustration, the *Guinness Book of World Records* reports that the most widely translated book in the world (other than the Bible) has only been translated into 382 languages<sup>6</sup> and the most translated document, the United Nations’ Universal Declaration of Human Rights, has only been translated into 500<sup>7</sup>. These top manuscripts have only been published in fewer than 10% of the world’s written languages. The most translated book (the Bible) is responsible for the establishment of many of the world’s writing systems. There-

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3 Walter Ong, *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word* (2012), p. 8.

4 Ethnologue, “How many languages are there in the world?,” [www.ethnologue.com/guides/how-many-languages](http://www.ethnologue.com/guides/how-many-languages); see also [www.ethnologue.com/enterprise-faq/how-many-languages-world-are-unwritten](http://www.ethnologue.com/enterprise-faq/how-many-languages-world-are-unwritten)

5 That leaves 3,135 languages with no written system at all.

6 The book is *Le Petit Prince* by Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, which the Guinness Book of World Records reports has been translated into 382 languages and dialects since its publication in French in April 1943.

7 <https://www.un.org/en/about-us/universal-declaration-of-human-rights>, retrieved 7/7/21.

fore, we may extrapolate that many writing systems are either underdeveloped or were established purely for the purpose of Bible translation.

Bible translators have contributed significantly to the expansion of writing systems in the developing world for the purpose of spreading the gospel. According to Dr. Erní Walter Siebert, executive director of the United Bible Society in Brazil (Sociedade Bíblica do Brasil) 7.2 billion people have Scripture in their own language<sup>8</sup>. The Scriptures are available in 7,359 languages (including sign and braille languages). 3,924 languages still do not have any Scriptures or portions of Scripture.

Why does Bible translation matter in a discussion regarding church planting among oral traditional people? We applaud the work of modern Bible translators in developing writing systems to facilitate the distribution of the written Word of God to unreached peoples around the world. But we also need to look at how we, as church planters, can best engage oral traditional people with the Word of God within their oral cultural context, regardless of their ability to read the Bible in any language.<sup>9</sup>

One approach has been to develop an audio version of the Bible available in the languages of non-literate persons. A more personal approach advocated by the International Orality Network is to tell the gospel message as scriptural story. These can be great tools in helping non-readers access the Word of God.

But when introducing the Bible's Author to an unreached, traditionally oral culture, there are other factors to consider besides accessibility. Primary oral communicators do not understand the gos-

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8 Personal correspondence, July 8, 2021.

9 Avery Willis points out, though, that "a Bible translation program that begins with the oral presentation of the Bible through storying and continues with a translation and literacy program is the most comprehensive strategy for communicating the word of God in their heart language. It offers a viable possibility of making disciples of oral learners while at the same time providing the whole counsel of God." Willis, ed., *Making Disciples of Oral Learners* (2005), p. 12.

pel when it is presented to them by means of expository outlines, principles, precepts, steps, and logically developed discourses.<sup>10</sup> Even if they do understand, they are unlikely to remember, or be able to reproduce, what they heard. We must think carefully about how people process information and formulate judgments based on their worldview and culture.

## WORLDVIEW AND ORALITY

A person's ability or inability to read and write is not the biggest influence in that person's worldview. Rather, the way literacy has influenced cultural worldviews over time is by writing technologies, as well as rapidly dispersing modern and fashionable ideas. Such ideas have had less impact on traditional cultures because those cultures have had less exposure to them. There may also be some implications for the modern, western church planter among contemporary western cultures as we are now moving away from text toward visual and digital communication methods. This same trend may contribute to oral traditional cultures skipping the technological era of text as they develop and retaining much of their oral traditional worldview through digital communication, even in the context of modernization. In other words, orality is here to stay, and some oral cultures will not bother with learning to read but will jump to technological media which present the textual information orally or with, say, animation.<sup>11</sup>

Culture and values are built on worldview structures so profoundly foundational to a person's understanding that they are difficult to identify apart from one's visible behavior. Paul Hiebert contrasts these differences by how people categorize things in their minds.<sup>12</sup> Most literate-based cultures have 'digital,' well-formed, and

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10 Ong, *Orality and Literacy*, pp. 8, 9, 39, 42, and 123.

11 Examples would be the use of recorded Bible stories or "Jesus film" instead of a printed text.

12 Paul G. Hiebert, *Transforming Worldviews: An Anthropological Understanding of How People Change* (2011), p. 618. E-book.



clearly delineated sets with a finite number of categories grouped into larger domains. These *digital thought processes* can be analyzed by their components — disassembled and reassembled for better understanding. Traditionally oral cultures tend to have ‘*analogical,*’ fuzzy thought processes that have an infinite number of variables between them.

People with *digital* set processes are often from a Western culture, which often carries with it an emphasis on independence. *Analogical* set thinkers are generally connected to what we often refer to as the majority, or developing, world. They generally belong to a more relational culture.

This causes problems when “digital missionaries” attempt to do church planting in “analogical societies.” In an article in *Baptist Press*, Erich Bridges states:

*They [oral learners] communicate, learn, perceive reality and embrace core beliefs through orally expressed stories, narratives, songs and proverbs — not through the books, periodicals, outlines and other forms of linear thinking preferred by literature cultures (and churches)... While two-thirds of the world’s population are oral communicators, 90 percent of Christian workers use literate communication styles while working among those oral people groups.... Orality-based methods need to be used if the whole world is to be reached for Christ.<sup>13</sup>*

This difference between *digital* and *analogical* processes helps us understand how differently people may view the Bible. Many of the tools the Western church uses to study and relate to the Bible are very “digital” in their approach. Bible word studies, systematic methods of theology, and “the Roman road” presentation of the gos-

13 Erich Bridges, “Worldview: Reaching the ‘Oral Majority,’” Baptist Press, October 7, 2004, <http://www.bpnews.net/bpnews.asp?id=19311>. Willis (*Making Disciples of Oral Learners*, p. 3) writes that there are “4 billion oral communicators of the world: people who can’t, don’t or won’t take in new information or communicate by literate means.... Ironically, an estimated 90% of the world’s Christian workers presenting the gospel use highly literate communication styles. They use the printed page or expositional, analytical and logical presentations of God’s word.”

pel are all examples of digitally designed systems. There is nothing wrong with any of these tools, but they may not be as impactful for our traditionally oral friends as they are for our Western neighbors. Interestingly, these systems are also extra-biblical tools we've used to satisfy our analytical need to disassemble, categorize, and reassemble Scripture.

Similar to categorization are the logics we use to evaluate a given situation. Western cultures tend to utilize a blend of logics: *algorithmic logic* (the basis for most sciences), *topological logic* (the root of the modern justice system), and *analogical logic* (which bases judgments on weighing opposing digital sets). Conversely, oral traditional peoples tend to value *relational logic*, also known as *concrete functional logic*.<sup>14</sup>

As an illustration of relational logic, Hiebert cites A. R. Lurii's 1976 study of the Kirghiz people of Central Asia. In the study, people were shown pictures of four things and asked which didn't belong to the set. When shown a picture of a hatchet, a log, a hammer, and a saw, common answers from the Kirghiz people included local analysis such as, "The saw will saw the log and the hatchet will chop it into small pieces. If one of these things has to go, I'd throw out the saw. It doesn't do as good a job as a hatchet." When it was pointed out that three of the items were all tools and should be one set, the Kirghiz were not convinced. They commented that tools were of no use without wood, and the hammer was useless without nails.<sup>15</sup>

If you can begin to understand the relational logic of why the hammer or saw should be eliminated from the aforementioned set, then you can begin to understand the mind of the oral traditional person. Everything and everyone is to be evaluated in relationship to the world, taking into account one's own experiences and functionality. The abstract idea of tools as a category separate from their use and function seems absurd.

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14 Hiebert, *Transforming Worldviews*, pp. 822-840.

15 *Ibid*, pp. 822-840.

Oral traditional people best understand God in the functional context of their life and world. That's why many Christians from oral cultures relate their testimony within the context of their life, family, and circumstances. Frequently, an important part of the testimony relates to a family need met by God. Stories of healing, miracles, and rescue from evil are common. Oral people generally have no reservations about recognizing the spiritual underpinnings of our world. They often can relate to Old Testament stories that describe life's challenges and God's response.

People from oral traditions often respond to the gospel in groups, commonly by consensus. Rarely will you find a believer whose first response to the gospel is a result of personal guilt or recognition of their own sin. It is a corporate revelation of the Creator that begins the journey of discipleship that brings them to the cross.

## LET YOUR CONSCIENCE BE YOUR GUIDE

There are many components to salvation theology: soteriology, *Ordo Salutis*, sanctification, justification, predestination, free will, etc. But most Christians agree that at some point, there must be repentance and turning from sin. For now, let's start there.

How is sin perceived in an oral traditional culture? In the words of Jiminy Cricket, "just let your conscience be your guide." Hannes Wiher states that every human being develops a conscience through relationships. This occurs at a very young age based on reinforcement by the significant people in one's life, or by their withdrawal of love.

Wiher identifies two models<sup>16</sup> of *conscience orientation*<sup>17</sup> common in various cultures. *Rules centered* conscience develops when a child

16 Based on Melford Spiro's 1958 work on development of conscience, as cited by Hannes Wiher in "Worldview and Oral Preference Learners and Leaders" in *Literate Practices: Continuing Conversations in Orality and Theological Education* (2014).

17 Conscience orientation is built on the *stratigraphic model* of creation (how we organize the visible and invisible world) and five basic soteriological concepts (God, man, sin, evil, and salvation). Wiher, "Worldview and Oral Preference."

is raised in a nuclear family (primarily by only a mother and/or father figure). *Relational* conscience occurs in children raised by many caregivers in an extended family or group culture.

Of course, there are other factors at work in how humans develop conscience. For example, in many Asian cultures, children are raised by a nuclear family, but their conscience development is more relational. Wiher suggests this is a result not only of the number of caregivers, but also of how behavior is corrected. If the home educators in a child's life give explanations and arguments (rules) for what constitutes bad behavior, the child's conscience will be primarily rules-centered. Conversely, if the educators (even if they are few) use relationally fueled statements like "What will the neighbors say?", then a relational conscience develops.

The tendency for oral cultures to be more relational is likely tied to the nature of oral communication. Text communication can happen without any human interaction, but oral communication — for the most part — cannot. It takes relationships to have oral communication.

With relational conscience comes a very complex system of social behavior. A child learns to relate good and bad behavior to the presence of a particular caregiver. When the mother is present, the child adheres to the mother's norms. When auntie is there, her values are functional. People with a relational conscience generally prefer personal interactions to individual work because the expectations are clearer. They see little value in working independently, because no one is there to observe the effort. The focus is status and acceptance rather than achievement.<sup>18</sup>

These two conscience models significantly influence a person's response to sin. For a rules-centered personality, missing the mark

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18 Wiher states that this relational conscience phenomenon is the basis of corruption. Right and wrong is determined by who is present. If an action is not observed, it is not wrong.

may trigger guilt, whereas someone with a relational conscience will likely experience shame.<sup>19</sup>

| RULES-CENTERED CONSCIENCE<br>(GUILT-ORIENTED) | RELATIONAL CONSCIENCE<br>(SHAME-ORIENTED) |
|---|---|
| Individualism                                 | Collectivism                              |
| Time Orientation                              | Event Orientation                         |
| Task Orientation                              | Person Orientation                        |
| Achievement Focus                             | Status Focus                              |
| Analytic Thinking                             | Holistic Thinking                         |
| Courage to Lose Face                          | Fear of Losing Face                       |

<sup>2</sup> Personality typology based on conscience orientation (Wiher 2014)

Of course, no one is purely one type or the other. In fact, modern missiologists add a third response — *fear*.<sup>20</sup> Like shame, fear is commonly found in collective/tribal societies — often among animists — as a reaction to concern that one’s behavior may offend spirits.

Each individual is a blend of rules-centered and relational conscience. We can all experience guilt, shame, and fear as a response to sin. However, research has shown an overarching trend among oral traditional cultures to experience either shame or fear, both of which are associated with a relational conscience.

## GUILT, SHAME, AND FEAR<sup>21</sup>

Jayson Georges describes three responses to sin as culture-group personalities: guilt/innocence, shame/honor, and fear/power.<sup>22</sup>

<sup>19</sup> Adapted from Sherwood Lingenfelter and Marvin Mayers’ model of basic values (1986), as cited by Wiher in “Worldview and Oral Preference.”

<sup>20</sup> Eugene Nida spoke in his book *Customs and Cultures* (1954) about tripartite division of culture, which was expanded and popularized by Roland Muller in *Honor and Shame: Unlocking the Door* (2001).

<sup>21</sup> For a broader treatment of the subject, see “Church Planting in the Contexts of Honor/ Shame and Fear/Power Cultures” in this book.

<sup>22</sup> Jayson Georges uses Ephesians to illustrate how God addresses needs of all three worldviews: guilt/innocence in 2:5, shame/honor in 2:12-13, and fear/power

- *Guilt/Innocence cultures* are individualistic societies (mostly Western) in which people who break the laws are guilty and seek justice.
- In *Shame/Honor* cultures, people are shamed for not fulfilling expectations, and seek to restore honor and regain their place in the community. Such cultures are common in the East.
- *Fear/Power* cultures are often found in animistic contexts (typically tribal or African) in which people who are afraid of evil and harm pursue power over the spirit world through magical rituals.

It is natural for an oral traditional communicator to tend toward either a shame or fear perspective. A shame response is quite normal in a relational society, and as we've already established, oral communicators are highly relational. Fear is also understandable, as many oral cultures relate the spoken word with power.

For most oral traditional cultures, two analogies resonate strongly. One is the analogy of a mediator who restores the person to their place in the community (saves the person from shame). The other is the analogy of a powerful commander who defeats evil, brings blessing to the community, and overcomes fear.<sup>23</sup>

Western Christians often communicate the gospel in the same manner in which they understand it — often from a guilt/innocence perspective with a legal metaphor. The guilt of sin demands punishment and justice. The offender has a desire to be redeemed from guilt and declared innocent. Christ's substitutionary death on the cross fulfills the need for justice, and renders the sinner innocent of wrongdoing in the eyes of the Judge. This same explanation, however, is less compelling to our oral traditional friends, because it doesn't address their felt response to sin — shame or fear.

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in 1:19-21. Georges, *The 3D Gospel: Ministry in Guilt, Shame, and Fear Cultures* (2014).

23 InterVarsity, "Honor Shame Theological Views," <http://ism.intervarsity.org/resource/honorshame-theological-views>

Once we understand the emotional response to sin and the cultural metaphor that resonates with an oral traditional culture, we can then find the Scripture passages that communicate the gospel message in a way that can be easily understood and embraced. The Bible addresses each of these felt responses to sin.

## WHAT IS SIN?

While God's holiness communicates a message of absolute truth regarding sin, human understanding of truth is revealed through experience in the context of culture and an expanding revelation of our understanding of God (1 Corinthians 13:12). In other words, God's definition of sin is concrete; humans' definition of sin is subjective.

One day a group of masked bandits attacked a man and robbed him. They took his backpack, which contained his cell phone, wallet, and personal documents. Later that night, one of the bandits went to the man's home and returned the stolen items. He explained that they didn't realize he was from their same tribal group.

In the scenario above, the bandits considered it wrong to steal from a clansman — but fine to steal from someone outside their group. If you were to tell them that God says, "Thou shall not steal," they would likely agree, but assume you meant *thou shall not steal from your own people*.

The significance of the problem of sin is complicated among oral traditional people because of the nature of the social structure. Oral cultures may see clear lines between right and wrong, but they see most situations in the context of relationship to community or creation. That adds an additional layer of complexity to what might be considered sinful.

## THE REMEDY FOR SIN

Oral cultures may be quick to accept the God of the Bible when they hear its stories — especially when they recognize shared history. However, syncretism is a common and difficult challenge that church planters must address. Oral people tend to feel connected to both the physical world and the spiritual world, but they often feel as though they are victims of tormenting spirits. They therefore seek to appease both good and evil spirits in an attempt to improve life. Since they readily accept the spiritual, they may see it as a good idea to add the God of the Bible to the others they already know, but not leave those others behind.

Christ's substitutionary death and victorious resurrection can best be understood in the context of God's relationship with humankind in the context of culture. Oral cultures will be less likely to see Christ as having taken our penalty for sin, and more likely to understand Christ as having taken on our sin-related shame and having restored God's honor. God then restores Christ's honor through the resurrection and ascension. Likewise, God's power is demonstrated through the resurrection that defeated evil forces or death. God's power over evil and his position of honor as king are relatable themes for oral traditional cultures.

## ORALITY METHODS

A number of techniques have been used over the years to address the needs of oral traditional communicators. One of the most prevalent and obvious has been the use of audio Bibles to bring Scripture within reach of non-literate people. While audio Bibles are a useful, vital tool in church planting, accessibility to Scripture is not the only hurdle to overcome. Oral traditional cultures have distinct worldviews and processes for making judgements that have been shaped by their highly relational values. Hearing may not equate to understanding.



The secular orality movement laid the foundation for understanding the mindset and traditional communication style of oral traditional cultures. Ong notes that oral literature (the stories and proverbs passed down through generations) differs from written text in a number of ways.<sup>24</sup> Research based on these ideas has led to resources for improved communication with oral cultures, including tools for sharing the Gospel. They are promoted through and known today as the orality movement.

To meet the needs of accessibility, relatability, and relationship, the Christian orality movement birthed a number of methodologies for sharing the Gospel through stories. While there are many methods available, most fall into one of two categories: Bible storying or oral Bible study.

| BIBLE STORYING  | ORAL BIBLE STUDY   |
|---|--|
| Often chronological   | Can be chronological or character-based  |
| The storyteller crafts the story to the context of the listener.                                | Emphasis is placed on keeping the text accurate to written Scripture.  |
| May shorten long lists to make the story easier to tell and hear                                | Tells the passage in its entirety, including lists of names, places, and things  |
| Explains definitions and terminology during the telling of the story                            | Uses an introduction to explain background and needed definitions rather than giving the information in the midst of the passage |
| The storyteller may change minor details to contextualize the story to the audience or culture. | Emphasis is placed on keeping details the same as written text.  |
| Requires the narrator to understand the culture and context in order to craft the story         | The passage is not contextualized to culture.  |

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.teresajanzen.com/orality-resources>

<sup>24</sup> In *Orality and Literacy*, Ong notes differences between oral literature and written literature: 1. Oral literature is additive rather than subjective; 2. prone to slogans and formulas rather than analytical language; 3. redundant; 4. the story remains close to human life and experience; 5. tends to be antagonistically toned (filled with hardship and suffering); 6. invites the listener to participate; 7. present minded; 8. situational.

Some people feel that oral Bible study methods are difficult because of the emphasis on accuracy to the written text. Others feel that Bible storying is too liberal with contextualization, and that it amounts to changing the Word of God to suit the listener.

The argument is not unique to the orality movement. Christians debate the same subject in regard to written Bible translations. Some, like *The Message*, are more contextualized to modern Western culture, while others strive to remain true to the text — or word-for-word translation.

The decision about whether to engage in Bible storying<sup>25</sup> or oral Bible study<sup>26</sup> is often determined by the methodology the storyteller learns first. If you have not yet been trained in a particular methodology, consider the differences between the two schools of thought when making your decision to learn a particular technique.<sup>27</sup>

## BEST PRACTICES

The Bible sets an excellent example for communicating with oral traditional cultures. Seventy-five percent of the Bible is narrative (story). Stories speak to the heart of oral traditional cultures because they are grounded in the human situation, set amidst the created world, and highly relational. To best engage an oral traditional culture, we should communicate the gospel in a way that can be accessed, understood, processed, and acted upon.

Paul Koehler points out:

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25 Organizations teaching Bible Storying include e3Partners, StoryRunners, and Story for Glory.

26 Organizations teaching oral Bible study include Simply The Story and Scriptures in Use.

27 For additional information on orality methods and approaches, visit [www.tere-sajanzen.com/orality-resources](http://www.tere-sajanzen.com/orality-resources)

*From the beginning of human history, knowledge passed from person to person and generation to generation in the form of stories. People everywhere relied on the oral wisdom embodied in the proverbs, poems, stories and songs of their culture.... [This happened] beneath a shady tree, at a busy market place, walking along a dusty road or sitting around a cooking fire at night. Listeners followed their stories with rapt attention, often participating in the storytelling ritual by asking questions, interjecting comments, laughing or even shedding a tear. But most importantly, they repeated the stories to others; and so each person became part of the media fabric of his or her culture.<sup>28</sup>*

Dennis Johnson notes that storytelling was Jesus' main communication method. "*Storytelling* unlocks the understanding of the New Testament Gospels. And we must recognize that Jesus is a model storyteller. He spent up to 90 percent of His time telling stories and parables and expressed great themes in strong, visual statements so that people comprehended what He had to say — but because His stories were based on typical situations that everyone understood, they *remembered* what He had said."<sup>28</sup>

Mission to the World, the foreign missions arm of the Presbyterian Church of America, lists advantages of using story and study:<sup>29</sup>

- It guards the integrity of Scripture.
- It protects the embedded theology from violations, fanciful interpretations, and applications.
- It is reproducible.
- People love a story!

Willis adds, "Because stories possess the power to actually change how people think, feel, and behave, and to change the way they see the world, it is important to have a sequential step-by-step process that leads them to a new, biblical worldview."<sup>30</sup>

28 Dennis Johnson, *Tell Me a Story: Orality; How the World Learns*, p. 103.

29 MTW, "Ministering to Oral Cultures in the 21st Century," <https://mtw.org/stories/details/ministering-to-oral-cultures-in-the-21st-century>

30 Willis, *Making Disciples*, p. 26.

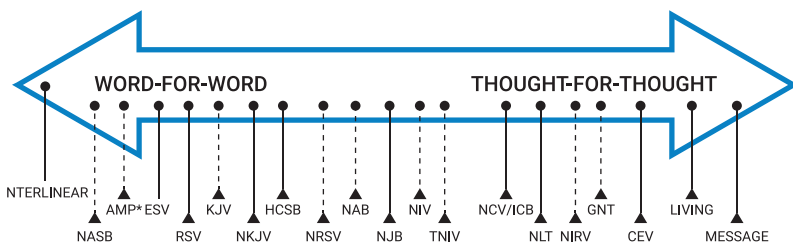
Let us put the information together to identify some best practices for ministry and communicating the Gospel.

### *Learn the Story*

One area where people often want to take a shortcut is in learning the story they are going to share. Sure, it's tempting to just read the story, but it's more powerful and impactful if you will take the extra step and learn the story thoroughly.

Oral people are highly relational, and one aspect of that is that they learn through apprenticeship. So if they see you reading the story, they will assume that is what they must do as well. That makes the gospel seem inaccessible if they cannot read. Additionally, sharing a story you know is far more relational than reading a story.

Does learning the story mean you have to memorize it? Well, that depends on your school of thought when it comes to Bible storying or oral Bible study. Between the two extremes is a gentle balance of accuracy and understandability. If you feel you must memorize the story word-for-word in order to remain accurate to the text, then the question is which version of the Bible will you memorize? English Bible versions vary from word-for-word translations to thought-for-thought and modern, contextualized versions.



In a sense, it is not possible to memorize the story word-for-word since if we are reading a Bible in English, we are dealing with translated text. However, we must respect the Word of God as the very complex, culturally-transcending text that it is. Any change, explanation, addition, or omission runs a risk of altering or removing a spiritual observation the storyteller may not even have noticed previously. Sharing oral stories across cultures is sure to illuminate even more of God's Word for the storyteller and the audience alike as people view the text from different cultural perspectives. Most orality methodologists recommend using a conservative translation (like NKJV, ESV, or NASB) and learning the story as accurately as possible.

## TECHNIQUES FOR LEARNING A STORY

1. Keep the text relatively short — 5 to 15 verses.
2. Read the story out loud to yourself from the beginning to the end. Then close your eyes and say aloud as much as you can remember — imagining the story in pictures as you do. Then read the entire text aloud again. Repeat these two steps, back and forth, while visualizing the story in pictures in your mind.
3. After you have done step 2 a few times, add some hand gestures to help you remember the story and to make your story come to life.
4. You may notice that changing pronouns to the name or noun they stand in for would make the story clearer. This is an acceptable modification of the text.

### *Chronological Stories*

Some people see the Bible as a collection of writings. Others say we always should begin sharing Scripture with the Gospel writings

in the New Testament. But the more we understand Scripture, the more we see the redemption story woven throughout the text from the very beginning. Like all stories, the Bible's message progresses — revealing more of the storyline as it goes. Telling stories in chronological order can help people follow the redemptive plot in the unfolding narrative. That doesn't necessarily mean you have to begin at the beginning, but if you are going to share a series of messages, sharing them in chronological order is a helpful tactic to connect the messages and build on past learning.

One of the first characteristics Ong points out about oral literature is that it is *additive* rather than *subordinate*.<sup>31</sup> That is, the listener thinks through the story progressively as it unfolds. A common cue for this in written text is the use of “and” or “and then”. We see an example of additive literary style in Genesis 1:1-5. Depending on your translation, you may count approximately nine ands in this opening text.

Take a moment to read the Genesis passage with the mindset of an oral communicator. Can you detect the concrete steps that show the progression of events?<sup>32</sup> It's like reading a cake recipe rather than a foodie novel. In a recipe, you build the cake step by step. A novel can create a scene in a variety of ways to enhance emotional effect. Oral traditional learners tend to relate better to information shared in an additive, or step-by-step, method.

### *Repetition*

One distinctive feature of oral communication is that it must be remembered. You have nothing to refer back to (as readers can with written text). So, repetition is an important element in communicating with oral traditional people. Don't be surprised, however, to see that their memory turns out to be much better than the aver-

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31 Ong, *Orality and Literacy*.

32 In addition to walking through the events one by one, the additive nature of the text creates a rhythm that, when spoken, helps the listener remember the story.

age Westerner's. After all, oral traditional people exercise the use of their memory all the time, and text-based cultures do not.

Repetition is also highly relational. There is something comforting in a familiar story. It also involves passing on the knowledge from one person to another. However, you don't have to use the same techniques each time you share information. You can have repetition with variety and keep things interesting. Here are some ideas:

- After you tell a Bible story, ask someone to tell the story back — as much as they can remember. The success of this may depend on how the culture and the group feel about standing up and telling a story.
- If the group is one that may feel uncomfortable with one person telling the story back, have people turn to one another in pairs and tell the story — as much as they can remember — to their neighbor.
- After you've told the story, tell it again, but leave blank spaces and encourage the listeners to fill in the missing information. You can ask a question to prompt them to remember.
- Have people stand and use gestures to tell the story together.
- Do a drama with the story. This might be easiest with a narrator sharing the story and actors providing the visual performance
- Encourage people to share the story with others.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Interestingly, missionary John Livingston Nevius used storytelling in his ministry in China in the mid- to late 1800s. It also was influential in church planting in Korea. Describing his methodology, he wrote, "We have the Scripture story exercise. Someone previously appointed tells the story; the leader of the meeting then calls on different persons one after another to reproduce it in consecutive parts; and afterwards all present take part in drawing practical lessons and duties from it. There is never time for more than one story, and often that one has to be divided, and has two Sundays given to it" (Koehler, *Telling God's Stories with Power*, p. 38). This parallels the methodology used today.

### *Participatory*

Generally, people learn best when they can participate with the subject they are learning. That is the same when it comes to issues of faith. It is helpful to create safe opportunities for people to participate. One way you can do this is by being careful not to ask yes or no questions, or questions with a right or wrong answer. Instead, engage listeners in conversation by asking questions like “What might we learn about the man in the story when he did....?” Open-ended questions encourage deeper discussion and learning.

Oral traditional cultures generally have social rules for who talks when. These are important to learn. Many oral cultures have rules: for example, introductions must be made at the beginning of a gathering, or the most important person speaks last (or first), or everyone gets a turn, or some people don't. The more you can encourage participation, the more opportunity you will have to learn what is important to the people and how they are responding to the message.

Once you learn a culture's rules, you can learn ways to encourage people to participate in a discussion. A big challenge is going to be to respectfully keep people on topic with the discussion. The easiest way to do that is to always refer back to the Bible story you shared. You can ask questions like “What in the story made you think about that response?” or “Is that issue addressed in this story?”

Don't be surprised when participants find new spiritual truths that you never noticed in a particular passage of Scripture. God has given us a rich text that transcends culture. We all have something to learn, and often a new cultural perspective is the key that will unlock a new message from God.



## Applicable

Many oral traditional cultures will find stories they are familiar with in the Bible. This is a great entry point for connecting with a people group. Learning how to apply that story to today's life and problems is also a valuable tool to introduce people to a God who cares about their current situation.

As Ong notes, oral literature tends to be focused on the present and connected to real-life situations.<sup>34</sup> Making the Bible applicable is essential to bringing God out of the book and into people's lives. One way to do this is to identify spiritual truths in the biblical text and then ask if that situation occurs today. Here's an example:

In the story of Adam and Eve being deceived by Satan to eat the fruit from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, we see that Adam and Eve were hanging out near the tree in the center of the garden, even though God had warned them that it was a dangerous tree. Today, do people ever hang out in situations that they know are not good for them?

Once you get the conversation started with a spiritual truth applicable to today, keep going deeper by asking "What does it look like when that situation happens today?" Follow up with "Have you or someone you know ever experienced something like that?"

## Scaffolding

While some church planters prefer to preach, a more effective approach is to develop opportunities for deep conversation. Like chronology, *scaffolding* — building upon what came before — allows people to find biblical truths for themselves and apply them to their lives and culture. Telling stories in chronological order will scaffold the biblical narrative naturally. The next level is to build upon the

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34 Ong, *Orality and Literacy*.

application, or what was learned before. These kinds of deepening and applicable conversations are what ultimately lead to a relationship with God and transformation of the heart and culture.

When you are presenting a series of Bible stories, one way to scaffold is to begin your session by asking someone to recap the last one — “What was the story we heard last week?” — and then share if they saw anything that related to that story since that previous session. This will also help keep the lessons in the mind of your audience so they will think about biblical application throughout the week.

Developing your story set is an art that comes with practice. Daniel Sanchez, J.O. Terry, and LaNette Thompson provide the beginner with some excellent story sets<sup>35</sup> and strategies for developing them.<sup>36</sup>

## CONCLUSION

Many traditionally oral cultures are from regions currently least engaged with the gospel message, and they often exist alongside highly literate people. Literacy itself is not what defines a traditionally oral culture, and the ability to read does not remove the traditionally oral culture’s influence on an individual’s thought processes and communicative style.

Textually oriented communicators think, learn, and communicate differently from oral communicators. In developing ways to minister to an audience of oral communicators, we need to first be aware of our own textually oriented mindset and methods. We also must seek to present the message in a way that a traditionally oral audience can understand, receive, and act upon. Doing this affords us the opportunity of planting viable, healthy churches among oral

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35 Daniel R. Sanchez et al., *Bible Storying for Church Planting* (2008), pp 140-142.

36 Sanchez et al., *Bible Storying*, pp. 69-114.

culture peoples. Oral people need stories that show sin, righteousness, prayer, faith, and love more than they need sermons about them. They need to connect what they know about the creator and creation to the biblical narrative of redemption in a way that is meaningful and transformational to their life.

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Define *orality* or *oral* culture in your own words.
2. Describe the correlation between orality and relationship.
3. What has been the ongoing struggle of many Westerners in communicating with oral cultures?
4. Explain why the Western concept of sin does not speak to the heart of most oral culture peoples.
5. Explain the difference between Bible storying and Oral Bible Study.
6. Name and describe at least two best practices when doing church planting among oral learners/speakers.

## PERSONAL NOTES

*Please use this space for writing your own reflection or a prayer regarding the content of this chapter.*

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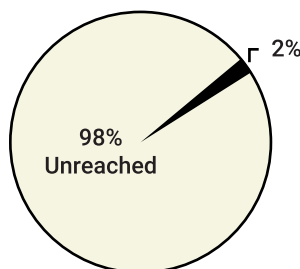
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## Church Planting in the Context of the Deaf

*Allan Orozco and Estefania Carvajal*

Deaf people represent one of the largest people groups worldwide that is unreached and unengaged with the gospel. Reliable statistics regarding the Deaf community are difficult to come by. This can be attributed to the fact that the deaf community is often overlooked. Nevertheless, the World Federation of the Deaf estimates there are 70 million Deaf people worldwide.<sup>1</sup> A mission organization focused on ministry with Deaf people suggests that less than 2% of them are Christ followers.<sup>2</sup>

70 MILLION DEAF



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1 <http://wfdeaf.org/who-we-are/>

2 <http://www.missionfrontiers.org/issue/article/the-deaf>

Why are such a small proportion of Deaf people followers of Christ? How can we take action to reach this great unreached people group? In this chapter we describe:

- six fundamental misconceptions about Deaf people that lead to problems in Deaf ministry
- three approaches to Deaf ministry that *seem* helpful, but are disconnected from the underlying needs of Deaf communities,
- what is working well today — four “best practices” that every high-quality Deaf ministry should embrace, and practical suggestions for engagement in this vital, growing area of ministry, and
- five ways to support Deaf ministries.

Before we proceed, it will be helpful to spell out why reliable statistics are difficult to come by — and why in this chapter we spell *Deaf* with a capital D. To some extent, this reflects the fact that hearing loss occurs at various levels in individuals, and terminology is loosely used to distinguish these levels. There is a significant distinction between three terms: *hard of hearing*, *deaf* and *Deaf*.

- A person is hard of hearing if they have some hearing loss, but enough hearing to be able to hear and understand — at least moderately — a spoken language.
- Someone who has substantial hearing loss, to the point where spoken language is difficult or impossible to understand, is considered *deaf* (with a lowercase d). Technically, this refers to a person’s level of audiological receptivity (their lack of physical ability to hear).
- When the word is written with a capital D, *Deaf* refers to individuals who share a common culture related to their use of

sign language, their values and views as Deaf individuals, their rules of behavior, and so on. These individuals may have varying degrees of hearing loss.

Another reason that reliable global statistics are sparse is that the national data that various countries report vary widely. For instance, in some nations, the census does not ask whether sign language is used at home. Thus, most published statistics are rough estimates unless otherwise noted.

## MISUNDERSTANDINGS: WHAT YOU MAY NOT KNOW ABOUT THE DEAF

To complete the task of making disciples of every nation and people group, we need to address the needs of the Deaf. Why is it that 2000 years after Christ walked this earth, a vast majority of Deaf people have not encountered the gospel in a meaningful way, even in countries saturated by churches and Scripture? In order to understand the situation, let's first consider some common misunderstandings shared even by many well-intentioned believers — misunderstandings that lead to a mismatch between the needs of the Deaf and the ministry provided.

### *Myth 1:* *All deaf people read well.*

If you are a hearing person, recall how you learned to read. As a young child, you most likely became fluent in your spoken language by hearing it from others. By the time you entered school, reading was just an actualization of the spoken language you knew well.

Deaf people do not have this experience. Deaf children who enter school are faced with learning an entirely new (phonetic) language through written means without sound, and often without having



had much exposure to any language at home. In many countries, Deaf children have very limited opportunities for high-quality education, which severely limits their ability to read. The task is clearly not impossible — many Deaf people can read, although worldwide, it is a small proportion. But for the vast majority of profoundly Deaf people, written language never becomes their heart language in the same way that sign language does.

*Myth 2:*

*Deaf people have access to all the information that the hearing people around them do.*

Because a majority of Deaf people worldwide struggle with reading proficiently,<sup>3</sup> they will not acquire a large amount of information through written text. By definition they also miss information communicated by auditory means. If you eliminated all the information you received by reading and hearing, how would you learn about the world around you? Most written information is not available in sign language.

*Myth 3:*

*Sign language is the same around the world.*

The linguistics organization SIL International has catalogued over 130 sign languages<sup>4</sup> worldwide so far, and the group's work continues. It is estimated that there are over 350.<sup>5</sup>

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3 “The enrollment rate and literacy among Deaf children is far below the average for the population at large. Illiteracy and semi-literacy are serious problems among Deaf people.” World Federation of the Deaf, <http://wfdeaf.org/human-rights> may be one place to review in order to understand the situation.

4 “Sign Languages,” SIL International, <http://www.sil.org/sign-languages>.

5 Among major sign language translation organizations such as DOOR International, SIL International, and the Deaf Bible Society, there is general consensus that 350 is closer to the actual number.

**Myth 4:**

*Sign language is just written/spoken language in a signed format.*

Sign languages used in Deaf communities are real, vibrant, rich, full languages. True, natural sign language does not have a one-to-one sign-to-word correspondence with a local spoken language. Instead, sign languages have their own grammar and linguistic structure.<sup>6</sup>

They are multi-layered, three-dimensional languages with multiple actions occurring simultaneously to communicate the intended message, not just what is happening with the hands. They are languages as valid as English, Russian, or Mandarin, and they can convey every complex or abstract concept that a spoken language can.

There have been attempts by hearing educators to represent spoken languages in sign format on the hands, but this type of signing is not a natural language.

**Myth 5:**

*Young Deaf children learn most of their language and information from their parents, just like you did.*

Deaf people worldwide are a unique people group unlike any other minority spoken language community. Approximately 90% of Deaf children are born to a mother and father who both can hear.<sup>7</sup> The vast majority of these hearing parents — even in the United States — never learn enough sign language to have an extended conversation with their deaf child or children.<sup>8</sup>

This means that most Deaf people do not learn language from their parents, and live as children in what one might call a com-

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6 See, for example, the “American Sign Language” page on the website of the U.S. National Institute on Deafness and Other Communication Disorders (a branch of the National Institutes of Health), <http://www.nidcd.nih.gov/health/hearing/pages/asl.aspx>.

7 U.S. statistics are available from Gallaudet University Press, <http://gupress.gallaudet.edu/excerpts/MTMEone2.html>

8 <http://gupress.gallaudet.edu/excerpts/MTME.pdf>

municatively dysfunctional household. Instead, they typically learn sign language (and thus, information) from other Deaf individuals when they enter a Deaf educational environment.

This experience leads many Deaf people to have closer relationships with other Deaf people than with their own hearing parents. They may consider Deaf friends to be their “family.” And because this Deaf experience in hearing households is fairly universal worldwide (in both developed and developing countries), Deaf people from different countries have a much closer cultural relationship than Deaf and hearing individuals from the same country.

***Myth 6:***

***If Deaf people were given the option to gain the ability to hear, they would.***

Sign language and the common experiences of Deaf individuals in a hearing world cause them to form an identity of their own, one directly associated with their deafness and quite different from their surrounding hearing community. This identity is so strong that many Deaf individuals, if given the choice to suddenly become hearing people, would choose to remain Deaf. Deaf individuals do not view themselves as broken hearing people. Instead, in a dynamic that is different from other differently abled groups, within Deaf communities, their difference creates a linguistically and culturally unique group of people. Consequently, the term *hearing impaired* should be avoided when describing individuals in the Deaf community. Deaf people want to be described in terms of who they are, not by what they are not.

**APPROACHES TO DEAF MINISTRY:  
A MISMATCH OF VALUES**

To restate the startling statistic with which this chapter opened, it is estimated that among the 70 million Deaf worldwide, less than

2% have understood the gospel. Why is this the case?

Historically there appear to have been three approaches by hearing churches to minister to Deaf individuals. These approaches, while well-intentioned, do not address the deep needs of the Deaf community.

### *Mismatch 1: Using Printed Bibles*

As we have seen, sign language is the heart language of the Deaf. Sign languages are the only ones that Deaf people can acquire through natural language acquisition processes. Even if high-quality educational opportunities were available to Deaf individuals so that they could learn written language well as a second language, it would never become their heart language. Thus, a printed Bible will never connect a Deaf person to the Word of God in the way that sign language-based Scripture can.

So, out of the more than 350 sign languages worldwide, how many have a completed sign language translation of the Bible? None. Only one sign language (ASL) has the New Testament completed. Most do not have a single verse.<sup>9</sup>

This is an issue not just within the Christian church. Deaf people worldwide experience a lack of access to information in religious institutions, whether they are mosques, temples, or churches. Many Deaf are hungry for spiritual truth, but they have no access to information. This leads to a great opportunity — the Church can now step in and provide that much-needed truth. However, it also provides opportunity for great error; when false teachings are provided in a medium that connects with Deaf people, they can easily spread through the Deaf community.

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9 To understand the complexity of sign language translation, a starting point can be the link <https://www.linguisticsociety.org/content/what-sign-language>

## *Mismatch 2: Sign Language Interpreters in Worship Services*

Some churches provide a sign language interpreter for the Deaf people who are present. While this is a heartfelt attempt to provide access, for a number of reasons it is not ideal for the Deaf community. Here are a few of the reasons.

### **Deaf Worship Styles**

Deaf people do not worship in the same way that hearing people worship. Simply turning songs into sign language does not mean they will connect with the hearts of Deaf people. In songs written for hearing people, the inspiration those people draw from them is usually closely tied to the music and is rarely communicated well by a sign language interpreter.

### **Context**

Preachers and other people speaking during a worship service or other church event often make references to jokes, songs, Bible verses, and other information that Deaf people do not know about. In order for Deaf people to understand the reference, an interpreter must pause and provide context for the reference. However, by the time this can be accomplished (if at all), the speaker has moved on — sometimes to a completely different subject — and the interpreter has fallen behind.

### **Deaf Learning Styles**

Storytelling is a highly valued means of communicating information in the Deaf community, as it is in hearing communities that do not have a written language<sup>10</sup>. By contrast, sermons directed primarily at hearing people often involve bits of information taken from various places, connected by a common phrase or idea. This approach can be nearly impossible for a Deaf person to follow.

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10 See the chapter “Church Planting in the Context of Oral Cultures” earlier in this book dealing with story telling.

### Interpreter Skills

While this is not true of all church interpreters, in many cases, an “interpreter” provided by a church is not skilled or certified. Their lack of proficiency leads to many errors, additions, and omissions when interpreting. This can turn a well-planned, theologically correct sermon into a disjointed, heretical mess.

### Deaf “Ministry”

Even if none of the four issues above were present, one of the most significant issues with the approach of simply providing an interpreter in a church service is that it reduces Deaf people to objects of a ministry, whereas God has created them to be ministers. Deaf people were created with gifts and talents to lead, teach, encourage, etc., but they cannot exercise those gifts in a context in which language barriers and cultural barriers are constantly present.

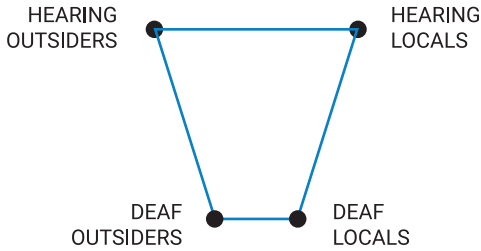
### *Mismatch 3: Leadership by Hearing People*

Hearing people in the church have more access to training and information, so there is a tendency to leave a hearing person in charge of a Deaf ministry. But this should never be a long-term solution. Instead, there should be a concerted effort to train, equip, and encourage Deaf leadership within a Deaf ministry. Deaf people should become the providers of ministry, and hearing people should provide appropriate support and encouragement.

In a related issue, when an outside organization wants to work in an international setting among a local Deaf community<sup>11</sup>, there are four groups involved in the process: hearing outsiders, Deaf outsiders, hearing locals, and Deaf locals. Which group is most closely tied to the local Deaf community?

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11 Or even an organization desirous of working in several different states.



The graphic illustrates how this plays out in the real world. Because Deaf outsiders and Deaf locals share many common experiences (and thus, many common values), they connect much more easily than hearing people (both outsiders and locals) do with Deaf locals. Thus, Deaf ministry done on an international scale should always try to involve Deaf leadership.

## BEST PRACTICES IN DEAF MINISTRY

What does it take to “do Deaf ministry right”? What elements ensure that a ministry will have deep, long-term impact on the Deaf communities it desires to serve?

### *Deaf People Should Be the Main Providers of Ministry*

We have already established that Deaf people are best reached by other Deaf people, whether on a local or international level. This means that any ministry serious about reaching the Deaf in a particular community should work primarily through Deaf people active in that community. If no Deaf believers can be found to work in the community, the primary responsibility of the ministry is to grow Deaf believers who can do so. The goal is for Deaf believers to have initiative and ownership in the work.

Church planting is best done by indigenous Deaf leaders. When church planting is done by hearing individuals, these churches often become dependent on the hearing individuals to lead. When

the hearing individuals depart, the church falls apart. When Deaf people plant the church, they show other Deaf people how to take ownership of the ministry, and the church will keep going after the church planters depart.

### *Actively Develop and Equip Deaf Leaders*

It is one thing to say it would be nice to have Deaf leaders. It is another thing to have a clear plan for developing and multiplying Deaf leaders in an organization. Deaf ministries should be actively developing Deaf leaders at all levels — and the Deaf should be providing this training.

This is true for church planting among the Deaf. Anyone who wants to formulate a sustainable model of church planting and multiplication in the Deaf communities of the world needs to start by partnering with Deaf leaders. This will ensure the church plants are well grounded on the foundation of Deaf values and are culturally suitable for Deaf communities, matching their learning styles and context.

### *Develop and Use Resources in Sign Language*

In order to build leaders and train Deaf workers to be the providers of ministry, accessible resources must be developed. However, all sign languages have an extreme lack of resources available in those sign languages. That means that Deaf ministries must make a serious commitment to creating high-quality resources that support their Deaf workers, or they must work in close coordination with other ministries that create such resources.

In particular, there is a great need for the development of Bible story and Bible translation resources that will give unreached Deaf communities high-quality initial access to Scripture. No sign language currently has a full Bible translation, and most do not have even one verse of Scripture translated. The development of sign lan-



guage Bible translations multiplies Deaf ministry by placing tools in the hands of other Deaf ministries. The Deaf Bible Society describes sign language Bible translations, stating “A sign language Bible is God’s Word translated from either a written or spoken form into a specific sign language used within a Deaf community. This is accomplished by following established translation principles and video recording the sign language Bible translation. A sign language Bible is a video Bible. Seeing God’s Word come alive in their visual language offers Deaf people and their communities the opportunity to know God intimately.”<sup>12</sup>

### *Make the Ministry Reproducible and Sustainable*

The role of any ministry should be to work itself out of a job. If ministry empowers local believers in a way that those local believers can subsequently reproduce in the lives of others, it will create a movement that expands the work far beyond the direct reaches of the ministry itself.

Multigenerational churches are the results of reproducible, sustainable ministry. Without the model of Deaf church planters, how would local Deaf leaders be empowered and equipped to start and lead new church plants in their communities?

## **TESTIMONIES OF DEAF PEOPLE IMPACTED BY DEAF CHURCH PLANTS**

### *Deaf People Can Not Share the Good News*

One of DOOR’s<sup>13</sup> Deaf translators from South Sudan, John Bai-cheng, grew up thinking and believing that only hearing people could share the Good News. John attended a hearing church with his mother.

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<sup>12</sup> [What is a Sign Language Bible and How is it Translated? \(Part 1\) - Stories - Deaf Bible Society](#), retrieved 7/7/21.

<sup>13</sup> To learn more about Door, go to <https://doorinternational.org>

“All I ever did in the church was sit down and mirror everyone else’s actions. I never understood what they did or why they did it,” he shared. “I was convinced that my sole role was to just sit there in the church and be ministered to. I didn’t think I could be useful in the house of the Lord.

“I finally had the opportunity to attend a Deaf-led church in Juba about three years ago. I saw Deaf people leading worship, praying, and sharing God’s Word. I was stunned. I had always believed that I didn’t have any gifts to contribute to the body of Christ.

“Later, I drafted a sign language translation of the following passages: Matthew 28:16-20 and Acts 1:4-12a. The first passage talks about the Great Commission — of Jesus sending out the eleven disciples to teach the nations about Christ. The second passage is when Jesus ascended into heaven, but before His ascension, He charged the disciples with the important responsibility of becoming his witnesses to the world. For the first time in my life, I realized that Jesus has sent all of us — including me, a Deaf person — to share the gospel and disciple those who receive Him. I recognized that God truly desires me to serve Him with the gifts and talents He has given me.”

### *No Longer an “Object of Ministry”*

“In the church, I felt like an object of ministry and not a vessel that God could use to minister to others,” shared a Ghanaian man.

“I became Deaf at an early age. I went to a Deaf school. My family was largely supportive. However, I struggled to connect with them on a deep level due to the limited communication we shared. The church I attended with my family had two interpreters. They helped in facilitating communication between the Deaf and hearing people in the church. However, I felt like I was not able to grow spiritually. I didn’t fully understand the interpretation of the sermon, and my attempts to read the English Bible exhausted me.

“This changed when I met Emmanuel Ofori from the DOOR 2-by-2 team. He shared portions of the Bible in Ghanaian Sign Language and invited me to a believers’ fellowship, which met in his house. I went home and started watching the Bible that Emmanuel had given me, and for the first time ever, my heart was refreshed. I could make sense of God’s Word. I hungered to watch more.

“I have seen so much growth in my personal walk with the Lord. I know I am a vessel that God can use to serve and teach others. Three months ago, my wife and I began hosting a weekly believers’ fellowship in our home. We always look forward to the meetings for spiritual nourishment and growth.”



## WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?

The future ahead for Deaf ministry is an exciting one. If you are a hearing individual involved in an organization with a passion to help change the world for one of the largest unreached, unengaged people groups, here are five things you can do right now.

### *Support Successful Deaf Ministries and Organizations*

As of right now, it is estimated that among the approximately 1800 language groups that are unengaged with the gospel, 15 to 20% of them are sign language groups among Deaf communities. At the same time, of all of the funds going to reach new unengaged groups, far less than 15% are being directed to sign language translation projects and Deaf ministries. There are only a few translation organizations and church planting movements that promote Deaf leadership and have a track record of training Deaf people to reach other Deaf. Supporting ministries that already have experience and expertise is one of the most direct ways to impact the spreading of the gospel among Deaf people worldwide.

Funding and other support (such as providing building space for Deaf ministries) are critical to Deaf ministry. Deaf people worldwide have unusually high unemployment rates due to limited access to good education and training, which makes it impossible to support Deaf ministry solely through contributions from Deaf people.

### *Partner with Deaf Ministries to Provide Training*

There are a limited number of Deaf people who already are equipped to train and support ministry among the Deaf. If your organization has expertise in training others to spread the gospel (for instance, training in Bible translation or in church planting) and you are willing to have others modify that training to fit the needs of the Deaf, you can connect with Deaf ministries working in those areas to help provide access to that training for Deaf leaders.

### *Develop and Share Materials and Resources*

Adapting existing ministry resources so they can be used in Deaf ministries often involves translation into sign language and adjustments to make them a good match for Deaf culture and learning styles. If your ministry produces materials that would be of value to Deaf ministries, consider providing access to them for a reduced

cost or free of charge, and allowing Deaf ministries to modify the material to fit a Deaf audience, so they do not need to reinvent the wheel. This would accelerate the process of resource development.

### *Connect Deaf Ministries to Hearing Organizations with Similar Goals*

Your ministry may not be actively working in the Deaf community, but it may have connections to other hearing organizations that are working in a geographic area where a Deaf ministry also is working. By introducing those hearing organizations to the Deaf ministry and encouraging them to engage in meaningful ways, your organization can help the active Deaf ministry expand its network remembering the key processes explaining who the partners need to be.

### *Education and Advocacy*

Many hearing organizations are completely unaware of the unique needs in the Deaf community. Some may be trying to work with the Deaf using the mismatched approaches this chapter has discussed. You can play a role in pointing hearing organizations to resources like this that can help them learn about the Deaf and how best to minister to them.

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. The authors speak about the uselessness of printed Bibles in the Deaf culture. What does this say about Bibles for church planting? What would be a better alternative?
2. Since other Deaf friends become “family,” what does this say about church planting among the Deaf? What ought to be the composition (or majority composition) of a new church to be formed?
3. Given the uniqueness of the Deaf culture, who should be leaders (church planters, local church leaders, teachers)?
4. What role, if any, would a hearing language church play in the development of ministry among the Deaf, especially in church planting?

## PERSONAL NOTES

*Please use this space for writing your own reflection or a prayer regarding the content of this chapter.*

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14 The bibliography does not consist of material cited in this chapter. These serve as reference points or resources that the reader can use to have a better understanding of the Deaf culture and how church planting and other ministries can be and are being accomplished.

# Spiritual Warfare: An Inescapable Reality

*Jeff Stam*

A distortion of truth is inherent in every non-Christian belief system, a reality that includes postmodernism and secularism. This distortion at best is rooted in people's desire to formulate a belief system that fits their experience and their culture, to make sense of the world in which they live. At worst, these falsifications are purposely driven by spiritual forces opposed to God and the light of truth. But both these scenarios are products of spiritual warfare. The first is indirect — a result of Satan's original attack on mankind and the resultant fall that corrupted our spiritual insight. The second represents a more direct attack by Satan on the Good News.

## THE IMPORTANCE OF A BIBLICAL WORLDVIEW

Each person has a *worldview*, which Tim Warner defines as “the thought system we develop for explaining the world around us and our experiences in it.”<sup>1</sup> That definition suggests that no two persons'

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1 Timothy Warner, *Spiritual Warfare* (1992).



worldviews are identical. They are as unique as fingerprints. That is because an individual worldview, in its most personal state, is made up of all of our past experiences and cultural exposure. Those experiences may have been positive or negative, conscious or subconscious, developed by means of formal or informal education, very limited or very broad. Our unique fingerprints are so permanent they can be used to identify us, but our unique worldviews can be somewhat fluid. A worldview is subject to constant flux and change because each day brings new experiences to the equation.

Broader worldview patterns are shaped by common experiences with people we relate to frequently. We could refer to this as our *societal/cultural worldview*. It is painted with broader strokes — for instance, cultural norms, formal education, ethnicity, and religion. Missiologists speak of *people groups* or *homogeneous units* that are identified by what they have in common. Common experiences and backgrounds lead us to common interpretations of and reactions to life around us. It is our system for filtering new input. That system or paradigm is our worldview. It is essential that we have and apply a biblical worldview in order to properly engage in spiritual warfare.

The Bible can be thought of as a drama — the unfolding relationship of God with his chosen people. Early in the Bible we see that God developed a personal relationship with our first parents. Even when that relationship was broken, God had every intention of restoring it — and a plan to do so. But the plan went far beyond one couple. It was global and eternal. The Bible shows us that plan being worked out through an individual (Abraham), then a nation (Israel), and eventually impacting every tribe and language on earth (Rev. 5:9). The primary stage for this drama is our earth, as introduced in the opening verses of Genesis 1.

The Bible does not provide much information about behind-the-scenes spiritual activity. God is not even formally introduced. The historical narrative starts with the assumption of spiritual reality.

It simply states what God did — he created the heavens and the earth. It was in our earthly environment that he planned to create and relate with humankind. It has been suggested that Genesis, the first book in the Bible, is not a book by man about God; it is a book by God about man. However, the Bible does not focus just on human beings and ignore the “backstage crew” — it is not completely silent about the spiritual or supernatural. Numerous passages refer to the heavens, paint pictures of God seated in majesty, and tell of the deeds of angelic beings that guard gates, lay waste to enemy armies, sing songs, deliver messages, and are the instruments of final judgement.

Sixteenth-century theologian John Calvin properly warned against creating elaborate theological theories about angels, because there is only scant information about them in the Bible. However, Calvin does give stern warning about the seriousness of spiritual warfare:

The tendency of all that Scripture teaches concerning devils [demons] is to put us on our guard against their wiles and machinations, that we may provide ourselves with weapons strong enough to drive away the most formidable foes. For when Satan is called the god and ruler of this world, the strong man armed, the prince of the power of the air, the roaring lion, the object of all these descriptions is to make us more cautious and vigilant and more prepared for the contest... Being forewarned of the constant presence of an enemy the most daring, the most powerful, the most crafty, the most indefatigable, the most completely equipped with all the engines, and the most expert in the science of war, let us not allow ourselves to be overtaken by sloth or cowardice, but, on the contrary, with minds aroused and ever on the alert, let us stand ready to resist; and, knowing that this warfare is terminated only by death, let us study to persevere.<sup>2</sup>

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2 Calvin's Institutes, I, XIV, 13-14

We are clearly told that the realm of angels exists and that there is significant interaction between the realm of God and the realm of man. This interaction of fallen angels — demonic forces — in the heavenly realms and on earth is the foundation for spiritual warfare. Revelation 12 paints a graphic, apocalyptic picture of this interaction, ending with the warning, *Then the dragon was enraged at the woman [Church] and went off to wage war against the rest of her offspring—those who keep God’s commands and hold fast their testimony about Jesus.* (v. 17) Satan desires to destroy the Kingdom of God and anything that causes it to manifest. The ministry of church multiplication, by its intended purpose, is a natural target of a very powerful spiritual enemy.

Unfortunately, there is often a tension between the elements of a worldview that are shaped by a person’s faith and the elements formed by the person’s experiences and culture. Our belief system, cultural mores, and personal experiences all have an impact on our worldview. In the West, another extremely important factor in the development of worldview is an educational system built on scientific naturalism that requires all truth to be tested and bound by natural laws. A person’s personal belief system is often overshadowed by these other building blocks of worldview.

Let me share an example of why this is so important. A very interesting story is found in 2 Kings 6:8-17. The setting for this narrative is the ongoing conflict between Israel and Aram (Syria). The protagonist is the prophet Elisha.

After affirming that there were no spies among his officers, the King of Aram sent his army to the village of Dothan to capture the prophet Elisha, because Elisha (by God’s intervention) was sharing with the King of Israel all of Aram’s plans for attack. Aram’s soldiers surrounded the village. When Elisha’s servant stepped outside and saw them, he quickly ran back in a panic to inform his master, wondering what they should do. (He was probably thinking of some sort of escape plan.) To the servant’s chagrin, the prophet simply

told him, “Don’t be afraid...those who are with us are more than those who are with them.” The servant had observed the situation with his own two eyes and was not convinced — probably thinking his master didn’t understand or was in denial.

Elisha, sensing his servant’s consternation, decided to pray for him: “O Lord, open his eyes so he may see.” In the servant’s opinion, that was precisely the problem — he had seen, and what he saw was disturbing! But Elisha wasn’t praying for his natural vision. He was asking the Lord to open the servant’s *spiritual eyes* so he would be aware of spiritual reality. The apostle Paul prayed for the believers in Ephesus (and for us) in much the same way, asking the Father to open the “eyes of our heart” to have spiritual understanding (Eph. 1:18).

What was the result of this new perspective, this new outlook on life, this new worldview? The Lord opened the servant’s eyes and he saw reality — “the hills full of horses and chariots of fire all around Elisha” (v. 17) — the Lord’s army!

We are in an intense spiritual battle. Whether or not we are aware of that battle does not have any bearing on the reality of its existence.

Having attended a summer course at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School in North America, I was introduced to the whole concept of spiritual warfare. This was completely new to me, even though I had attended a biblically solid Bible college and seminary. The topic of spiritual warfare had just been by-passed—not denied, but ignored. But it had the same effect as denial; it allowed me to go to Latin America as a church planter totally unprepared to deal with a significant dimension of spiritual reality. My eyes, like Elisha’s servant, were closed.

Shortly after returning to the field, I attended a service in which an individual was being very disruptive as things were getting

started. Interestingly enough, the disruption was through a loud, vocal supposed praising of God. Perhaps due to my recent training, my spirit was checked and I sensed that what was being displayed wasn't just religious fervor. As I approached the individual to gently let him know that he was becoming a distraction for the pastor and congregation, I touched his shoulder. He suddenly convulsed and threw and fell to the floor, displaying a strong demonic manifestation. My eyes were Opened! This was new reality to me, but fortunately with my very limited training, we were able to identify a "spirit of false religiosity" and pray towards removing the spirit and calming the young man down, allowing the church service to continue in peace.

Having a biblical worldview — having our spiritual eyes wide open — gives us two distinct advantages. First, we can recognize the enemy and his tactics, so that we know what we are up against. Second, we can recognize Who is on our side and how He comes to our aid. We need to be aware of the fact that we fight this war from a Victor's position.

## IT'S ALL ABOUT GLORY

*"You are worthy, our Lord and God,  
to receive glory and honor and power,  
for you created all things,  
and by your will they were created  
and have their being." (Rev. 4:11)*

All?! — yes, I mean all...*everything* — that we as believers are called to do or to be is about God's glory. The Westminster Shorter Catechism, which was written in the mid-17th century for the teaching of biblical doctrine and discipleship of believers, begins with an all-important philosophical and theological question:

### *What is the chief end of man?*

In the answer lies the primordial reason for the existence of spiritual warfare, the ongoing conflict between Satan and saint:

Man's chief end is to glorify God, and to enjoy him forever.

## **BIBLICAL FOUNDATION FOR GOD'S GLORY**

The word *glory* is mentioned over 400 times in the Bible (depending on which version you use). It almost always refers to God's glory or to giving glory to Him. It was God's glory as a cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night that followed the Israelites in the wilderness for 40 years. It was God's *shekinah* glory that inhabited the Holy of Holies in the temple. The angels sang of God's glory when Jesus was born. It is what caused the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders to fall before God's throne (Rev. 4:11)—the overwhelming instinct to proclaim his glory.

Using a more colloquial expression, we could say that God's glory or giving God glory is the bottom line for our purpose and for God's purposes. That may sound extreme or exaggerated, so let's take a look at a couple of key passages. The first is found in Ephesians 1:3-14:

<sup>3</sup>Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ. <sup>4</sup>For he chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight. In love <sup>5</sup>he predestined us for adoption to sonship through Jesus Christ, in accordance with his pleasure and will — <sup>6</sup>to the praise of his glorious grace, which he has freely given us in the One he loves. <sup>7</sup>In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God's grace <sup>8</sup>that he lavished on us. With all wisdom and understanding, <sup>9</sup>he made known to us

the mystery of his will according to his good pleasure, which he purposed in Christ, <sup>10</sup>to be put into effect when the times reach their fulfillment — to bring unity to all things in heaven and on earth under Christ.

<sup>11</sup>In him we were also chosen, having been predestined according to the plan of him who works out everything in conformity with the purpose of his will, <sup>12</sup>in order that we, who were the first to put our hope in Christ, might be for the praise of his glory. <sup>13</sup>And you also were included in Christ when you heard the message of truth, the gospel of your salvation. When you believed, you were marked in him with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit, <sup>14</sup>who is a deposit guaranteeing our inheritance until the redemption of those who are God's possession — to the praise of his glory.

Regardless of where one stands theologically on the issue of predestination/election or foreknowledge, it would be very difficult to suggest that this passage does not demonstrate clearly that God has a plan, the fulfilling of his predetermined will. There are eight references to his choice (in verses 4 and 11), his predestination (5, 11), his will (9, 11), a determined future fulfillment (10), and a seal and guarantee (13). However, the more telling thing about this plan was that its ultimate purpose was not our salvation. The bottom line was his glory.

This was “*to the praise of his glorious grace,*” we are told in verse 6. God's glory is revealed through his grace, and his grace is demonstrated in our salvation. In verse 13 we read that everything about the plan being described (hope in Christ) was for the “*praise of his glory.*” Paul repeats the point yet again in verse 14, alluding to the “*redemption of those who are God's possession*” as being “*to the praise of his glory.*”

The ultimate purpose of God's plan is laid out also in John 17:4, this time from the lips of Jesus. In prayer, Jesus tells his Father, “I have brought you *glory* by completing the work you gave me to do.”

God incarnate became human, was born, suffered, and died. He announced the in-breaking of God's kingdom, which was manifested as He healed the sick, cast out demons, died to defeat the power of sin, and was resurrected to defeat the power of death — all to bring to the world the offer of salvation to all mankind, bringing glory to His heavenly Father.

When we dare to profess that our task as disciples is to emulate Jesus Christ — to be Christlike, to live by grace as we walk in obedience as followers, to suffer if need be — then we must do it to glorify God. There are numerous scriptural reminders of this task. Here are just a few ways we are called to glorify God:

- through our fruit (John 15:8)
- like-mindedness towards Christ (Rom. 15:5)
- bow our knee and confess Jesus as Lord (Phil. 2:9-11)
- pass through tests and trials (1 Pet. 1:7)
- demonstrate a godly life before unbelievers (2 Pet. 2:12)
- in everything we do (1 Cor. 10:31)
- even in death (John 21:19)

### *How Does Satan Fit In?*

When we think of Satan, we may picture a caricature of a red, horned, man-like creature with a tail, cloven hooves, and a pitchfork. Nothing about that description is supported biblically (except perhaps the color red). Satan is symbolically described as an enormous red dragon in the battle between Satan and his followers (referred to as fallen angels, evil spirits or demons) and the archangel Michael and his angels (Rev. 12).

There are numerous character descriptions of Satan in the Bible, such as *deceiver, father of lies, the evil one, tempter, and the one who steals, kills and destroys*. What we might call his "job titles" include prince of the air, ruler of this world, and the one who leads the whole world astray. A graphic description in 1 Peter 5:8 makes clear



the nature of Satan's relationship to us, as believers — Satan is described as a "roaring lion looking for someone to devour." Let me remind you that none of this is going to mean much to us if we do not have a worldview that acknowledges spiritual reality.

There are so many phrases of that sort in the Bible that it is easy to overlook two very different biblical descriptions of Satan. In Isaiah 14:12 he is referred to as the Morning Star, followed by an accounting of what he had hoped to accomplish (thwarted by the battle described in Revelation 12). He was in a position to "go for the glory" because he already held a glorious station in heaven.

The other Old Testament description of a "pre-fallen" Satan is in Ezekiel 28:11-17. Here Satan is described as a "model of perfection, full of wisdom and perfect in beauty." He was of glorious state and position on the "holy mount of God." He is even described as having been blameless, until he became proud and his wisdom was corrupted by his splendor. As a result, he was cast down to earth (again, alluding to Rev. 12).<sup>3</sup>

With this background we can see some of the logic — or, at least, the root causes — behind spiritual warfare. Satan was a glorious heavenly creature who had the privilege of enjoying God's presence on the Mount of God. That position of power, prestige, and glory caused him to desire even more. This is the same twisted thought pattern that Satan inflicted on us when he tempted Adam and Eve to desire more than the wonderful position and relationship with God they already had. The only source for more glory was in God himself, and Satan sought to claim it. In his attempt to claim God's glory, Satan was defeated and cast out of heaven to earth. He lost all his glory.

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<sup>3</sup> Some feel these two passages only refer to the Kings of Babylon and Tyre, respectively. However, it is not at all unusual for prophecy to be two-fold, as is the case in the promise of a sign to King Ahaz, which was also a prophetic announcement concerning the Messiah (Isa. 7:14). It is also obvious that some of the descriptors in Ezekiel 28 do not fit the King of Tyre.

Pause and think about that for a moment. That one-paragraph encapsulation gives us the *modus operandi* for why Satan does what he does. A) He was a glorious creature. B) He lost all his glory and position. C) Since he cannot take God's glory from Him, he does everything in his power to keep God from receiving any more glory.

We often recognize our own reasoning reflected in Satan's mindset. If someone else had what we desperately desired, and we had tried but failed to obtain it and had been dismissed from our position, we, too, would likely be resentful — at best. At worst, we might try to destroy the other person. Satan never lost his power as an archangel, and he has a host of spirit followers who also wield power. Satan has dedicated all his energy and power to destroying anything that has the purpose of glorifying God. Remember, he cannot directly attack God, so he directs his attacks at whatever belongs to God.

Christ's purpose, as we saw in Ephesians 1 and John 17, was to glorify His Father. Satan used a variety of strategies to try to prevent the Messiah from fulfilling his purpose of glorifying his Father. He tried direct temptation, the ridicule and rejection of his people and the spiritually elite, and even death by means that would curse Jesus (Deut. 21:23).

As we saw in the verses we looked at above, we are also called to this ultimate purpose of bringing glory to God. In Paul's letter to the Corinthian believers he steers them away from their mundane concerns and tells them, "So whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God" (1 Cor. 10:31).<sup>4</sup>

Because Satan is constantly seeking his own glory, he tends to show-off in an attempt to bring attention to himself. Even though his lies and trickery can be very subtle at times, if one is aware of his existence and motives it become easier to see through his designs and thwart his plans. This often ends up in the glory being redirected to God.

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4 For a more complete discussion of the role that the glory of God plays in spiritual warfare, see *Straight Talk About Spiritual Warfare* by Jeff Stam (2016).

I recall a series of attacks on a missionary family. They seemed to be getting hit from every side—health, finances, plans... They were becoming demoralized and their ministry was being negatively impacted. In our secular world it's easy to attribute this to a string of coincidental "bad-luck," but this family was aware of the enemy's ways. Praying and searching for a spiritual cause that may have left a door open for his attacks, they were led to a certain recent activity they had participated in. After renouncing that activity and turning it over to God, everything almost immediately returned to normal. As a result, the family all the more fervently praised God and gave him glory. Sometimes his plans backfire.

## THE WORK OF GOD'S KINGDOM

So far in this chapter we have laid out a theological foundation concerning worldview, God's glory, and Satan's goals. The rest of the chapter builds on those insights to address how we can glorify God through bearing witness to God's kingdom and participating in its enactment within the world as the Body of Christ.

From Matthew's perspective, the last and most important commandment Jesus gave to his disciples (us) was to "expand my/the Father's Kingdom." We commonly refer to this as the Great Commission, "to go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age" (Matt. 28:19-20).

It is clear in Luke's description of Pentecost in Acts 2 that the intent of this bearing witness to God's kingdom was to result in a diverse, growing, and global community of disciples. The Church was born! At the end of that chapter of Acts we see the results of this wonderful Pentecost event — the Church gathers, learning, fellowshiping, serving each other, and praying. The final verse wraps

it all up in the phrase “praising God.” In the Greek and the Latin, praise and glory stem from the same root word — *doxa*, the root of the word *doxology*.

You have been called to be a church planter. It is a leadership role on the front lines in a war that has eternal significance. You and the church community must allow God to open your eyes to the spiritual reality that surrounds you. Paul isn’t just using a figure of speech when he tells us that “our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms” (Eph. 6:12). You have very real spiritual enemies. You must be cognizant of them to avoid being blindsided and ambushed. “Be alert,” Paul says, for “your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour” (1 Pet. 5:8).

When I was an infantryman in Vietnam, the most intense (and dangerous) assignment was to be walking point. Up front. Watching for any sign of the enemy, whether physically present or by means of booby traps that had been set to inflict physical and emotional wounds — wounds that kill or maim to remove you from the conflict. The purpose was to remove the soldier as an effective element in the battle. An Army Ranger once told me that the average time you can effectively walk point is nine minutes — it takes that much focus, concentration, and alertness. You need to be aware of all the possible tactics the enemy uses and always be on the alert. Satan is an astute enemy.

John Calvin’s warning about spiritual powers and his call to be ever vigilant is still relevant today.

Another dimension of spiritual insight is to be able — like Elisha’s servant — to see where God’s hand is at work. There is more going on behind the scenes than we are naturally aware of. Although you may be battle weary in your role of multiplying churches, God has not abandoned you. We are not always aware of what He is working

out in the spiritual recesses of the peoples' lives into which we pour ministry. Though you may not always see it, sense it, or feel it, the victory belongs to the Lord.

A number of years ago, I was sitting in my church's office when I received an unexpected phone call. When the caller identified himself, it was a name on the fringes of my memory from many years before. He was calling to thank me for changes that had taken place in his life as the result of my having introduced him to the Lord. All I remember doing was providing a few answers to some of his questions and inviting him and his wife to an evangelistic meeting. I don't recall any decision on his part as a result of those efforts. Soon after, my wife and I moved across the country and we never had contact again...until the day when he called to tell me of something that had been going on in his life spiritually, something behind the scenes that I hadn't been privy to. In this battle we must also remember that God is always working in this unfolding drama. God won't always share all the details with us, but when God does, we don't want to miss it.

If you sense that you or your church are coming under spiritual attack, don't be surprised. If it feels like you are being singled out by Satan, you are. Church planting — our participation in God's mission through the purposeful, strategic expansion of the cause of the Kingdom — brings God great honor and glory. Every time his name is proclaimed. Every time a knee is bowed to him. With every new decision made, every new person God can now address as "my son" or "my daughter" — every new prayer directed towards God — every wound and broken heart that is healed in his name. It all, all of it, brings glory to God.

Yes, you evangelize. Yes, you preach the Good News. Yes, you begin Bible studies. Yes, you baptize new believers. Yes, you serve your community. But remember, that is all a means to an end, and that end is you are participating in God's mission, which brings glory to your Heavenly Father.

## WHAT ABOUT YOU?

You are involved in God's mission in the world. Satan wants to stop your participation and success in God's mission, and he wants to do so by stopping you. His efforts to destroy your work are just a way to fulfill his twisted goals. He also wants to destroy you — he is filled with bitter hatred towards you. You have probably heard the phrase, "Any friend of yours is a friend of mine." The converse is also a truism: "Any friend of my enemy is my enemy." We are God's friends. We are his children. We are his beloved. For this, Satan has turned his wrath on us as sworn enemies.

If someone wanted to hurt me, to hurt me deeply, they would do so by hurting the ones I love. By attacking us, Satan is attempting to wound the heart of God. While we were on the mission field one of the church planters had a young daughter who twice tried to commit suicide. The parents had seen their own share of spiritual struggles, but the attack on their daughter was almost enough to cause them to leave their calling.

Something else may be going on, too. It is safe to assume that back when Satan was in his position of honor and glory in the presence of God, Satan knew the love of God — knew what it was like to be cherished. When he gave up his honor and glory, he also gave up his status of being cherished. He hates us because we have something he once enjoyed, but no longer has.

Let's take this one step further. What Satan most prized and most coveted was glory. We've already looked at a number of passages that refer to ways that we glorify God, which Satan attempts to thwart because he doesn't want God to receive any more glory. But then the unthinkable happens — God chooses to share his glory with us!

Now if we are children, then we are heirs — heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ, if indeed we share in his sufferings in order that we may also share in his glory. (Rom. 8:17)

What if God, although choosing to show his wrath and make his power known, bore with great patience the objects of his wrath — prepared for destruction? What if he did this to make the riches of his glory known to the objects of his mercy, whom he prepared in advance for glory — even us, whom he also called, not only from the Jews but also from the Gentiles? (Rom. 9:22-24)

He called you to this through our gospel, that you might share in the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ. (2 Thess. 2:14)

And when the Chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the crown of glory that will never fade away... And the God of all grace, who called you to his eternal glory in Christ, after you have suffered a little while, will himself restore you and make you strong, firm and steadfast. (1 Pet. 5:4, 10)

Perhaps now you understand and appreciate more the biblical warnings about Satan wanting to “sift us as wheat” (Luke 22:31) or to “be self-controlled and alert” because of our enemy, the devil (1 Pet. 5:8). Now we can take to heart Paul’s advice to recognize the *real* battle and to put on God’s armor (Eph. 6:10-18). This is why Paul, much like Elisha, prayed that the “eyes of our heart” would be enlightened to understand the spiritual reality of our hope and power — power shared with Jesus Christ, whom God raised to his right hand “far above all rule and authority, power and dominion” (Eph. 1:18-21).

### *Relying on God’s Grace and Power*

Jesus tells Peter that the gates of hell will not overcome the church

(Matt. 16:18). When we first read this, it sounds like a defensive posture, since “overcoming” is being prevented. In reality, the meaning is that the gates of hell (guarding Satan’s kingdom on earth) will not withstand the onslaught of the church. Light overcomes darkness. Period.

*There are two offensive positions we must take.*<sup>5</sup>

The first comes from the wisdom of Solomon. “Above all else, guard your heart, for everything you do flows from it” (Prov. 4:23). None of us has a pure heart. It’s why Christ came, because sin has a tendency to flow from that inbred impurity. Christ has come to deal with that impurity — to allow us to restore our relationship as children of God (Jn. 1:12) and become “new” creatures (2 Cor. 5:17). But we still deal with the world, the flesh, and Satan’s temptations. We still struggle on occasion with the old man seeking to regain a foothold in our heart.

We would be wise to rely on the primacy of God’s agency. Giving God *permission* sounds strange, but he wants the sincere request to come from us — “Search me, God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts. See if there is any offensive way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting” (Ps. 139:23-24). This searching — taking spiritual inventory of our lives and re-surrendering to God — should be a regular practice. Some churches have the practice of very purposefully coming to God in confession and repentance as preparation for receiving the sacrament of communion. This is a great idea, but perhaps it should be practiced even more regularly.

A search of our hearts requires listening and learning to hear the Holy Spirit respond to that request. But the Holy Spirit won’t guide

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<sup>5</sup> Neil T. Anderson, *The Steps to Freedom in Christ* (2017). This 32-page booklet offers a step-by-step guide to help resolve personal and spiritual conflicts, break free from bondage and renew the mind, and experience daily victory as a child of God. It is an excellent resource for regular “guarding of the heart” and doing a personal spiritual inventory.



us unless we have demonstrated a willingness to respond in obedience. The catch is that even that response must be a work of the Spirit. Guarding your heart — taking an offensive stand of purity against Satan — requires full surrender. As a busy, sometimes overworked church planter you must take the time to commit yourself to devotion and prayer.

The second strategic field of battle is the mind. It bears repeating that Satan is a deceiver. He is the father of lies, the accuser. He is the one responsible for “leading the whole world astray” (Rev. 12:9). One of his common lies is to tell us that it is alright to go in a different direction than God has commanded. Another is to challenge our understanding of what God has said. He will even call God a liar. His strategy hasn’t changed much since the Garden of Eden. “Did God really say... That’s not what he meant...That’s not true, you won’t die...” To combat this we have to know what God says, both in his Word and to us by his Spirit. This is why John counsels us to “test the spirits,” because Satan will test us (1 John 4:1). It is typical of Satan to tempt us with a lie like “it’s okay” or “it’s not so bad” or “everyone is doing it.” Then as soon as we give in, he accuses us, telling us how terrible we are and that God can’t possibly love us or use us if we sin so readily.

This leads to another attack: we are lied to about who we are and our position in Christ. Satan doesn’t want us to know our true identity in Christ, because he knows it represents a position of power, power that will overcome him.

There is an interesting narrative in Zechariah 3:1-5, one of a series of visions the prophet had in a single night. In this vision he sees Joshua, the current high priest in Jerusalem, in a setting like a courtroom. He is standing before the angel of the Lord. Many scholars feel that Old Testament references to the “angel of the Lord” are to pre-incarnate Christ. Standing at Joshua’s side to accuse him is Satan. The interesting thing is that the accusations are probably based on at least a kernel of truth, because we learn in verse 3 that Joshua’s

clothes are filthy. This would have never been the case of the priestly garments, but in the vision the stains represent the sins of Joshua (and the people he represented). But the angel of the Lord ignores the accusations (true or not) and merely rebukes Satan, effectively silencing his accusations, and says: "Is not this man a burning stick snatched from the fire?" In effect, the angel/Jesus is saying that he has taken care of it and there's no more to be said. To prove his point, the angel/Judge then commands that Joshua be clothed in clean garments and says, "See, I have taken away your sin."

That is a picture of spiritual truth! In the light of that truth you will overcome the darkness and any spiritual attack leveled against you or your ministry. While there is truth to the many warnings about spiritual warfare, also true is the reminder from old, faithful John, who through many trials had seen God remain a faithful victor:

You, dear children, are from God and have overcome them, because the one who is in you is greater than the one who is in the world. (1 John 4:4)

## CONCLUSION

Here is a brief re-cap. We have discussed four major concerns:

*The importance of a biblical worldview*, without which we are unable to recognize the spiritual battle that is raging around us. A biblical worldview is essential in awareness of our enemy and his strategies, as well as our spiritual position in Christ and the authority that comes with that position.

*The importance of God's glory*, which in military terms would be described as "the mission of the engagement." In business terms it would be "the bottom line." In the Shorter Catechism it is "man's chief end." The reduction of God's glory is Satan's motive. Glory is the prize in this battle.

*The importance of the Kingdom of God.* Participating in God's mission by bearing witness to and enacting the kingdom is the key activity for bearing witness to God's glory. We are called as ambassadors and witnesses of that kingdom.

*The importance of personal protection and preparedness.* Since we are the chosen envoys of God's Kingdom, it is important that we guard our hearts and minds — two personal battlegrounds in Satan's stand against us. We need to base our thoughts and deeds on truth, which brings us full circle to a proper understanding of who and what we are according to Scripture's view of reality.

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Read Genesis 3:1-4; Luke 22:31; Job 1:6-12, 2:1-7. What similarities do you see in Satan's activity or desire in these passages? What differences do you note in the way that Satan attacked Eve and Job?
2. Have you ever had a personal experience which you felt was angelic or demonic in nature but were hesitant or uncomfortable in sharing it? If so, write down that experience in as much detail as you can remember so you can better think it through. When you feel able to share that experience with someone else, do so.
3. Jot down any reason Satan may have for attacking your ministry or you personally. Have you felt attacked or oppressed? If you have, how do you typically deal with those attacks?
4. You have been pardoned, reconciled, and adopted as God's child. What effect does that reality have on your Christian walk and your ability to be a victor in spiritual battle?

5. Are you able to identify accusations or lies Satan has told you about yourself? Why have you believed those lies in the past? How can you resist them?

**PERSONAL NOTES**

*Please use this space for writing your own reflection or a prayer regarding the content of this chapter.*

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## Contributors to this Writing Project

### TODD BENKERT

Todd Benkert is pastor of Oak Creek Community Church (SBC) in Mishawaka, Indiana and adjunct professor for the John W. Rawlings School of Divinity at Liberty University. He is passionate about building unity in the body of Christ, racial reconciliation, and advocacy for and ministry to survivors of sexual abuse. Todd has a Ph.D. in missions from Southern Baptist Theological Seminary and encourages support for North American church planting and equipping indigenous leaders in the global South and East.

### MICHAEL BINDER

Michael Binder is a professor, pastor, and church leadership consultant. He currently is on the faculty of Luther Seminary teaching ministry leadership; Michael also serves on the Innovation Team at Luther. He helped start Mill City Church in Northeast Minneapolis in 2008 and continues to serve there. He also consults with congregations and denominations in the U.S. and Canada. He lives in Saint Paul with his wife and three children.

## ALLAN OROZCO AND ESTEFANIA CARVAJAL

Allan Orozco and Estefania Carvajal give leadership to Door International's ministry in Costa Rica. DOOR International is a translation and training organization whose mission is to bring God's Word and reproducing fellowship to the Deaf worldwide. DOOR is a member of the Wycliffe Global Alliance and the Forum of Bible Agencies International, and is a Count for Zero Organization with the Issachar Initiative. For more information about the ministries of DOOR or to support work among the Deaf, visit [www.DOORInternational.com](http://www.DOORInternational.com) or contact DOOR by email at [info@doorinternational.com](mailto:info@doorinternational.com).

## XOÁN CASTRO

Xoán Castro is the Spain Director for Multiplication Network. He lives in Valencia with his wife, Jane. They have three grown children and two grandchildren. He enjoys reading, traveling, and spending time with my family.

When Xoán was 20 years old and on his way to chemistry class at the university, he picked up a flyer someone had thrown in the garbage. He had no idea what prompted him to do something like that! The tract said, "Who was Jesus?"; he read it and filled in his information to receive a Bible course through the mail. He did not know there was also a seal with the address of the church that had distributed the flyers. Young people from the church sent Xoán a letter and then visited him at home to introduce him to Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. From that date, the adventure with Christ has not ceased to surprise and amaze him!

Xoán was the ministry director of Evangelism and Missions for the Baptist Convention of Spain from 2000 to 2016. One of the principal jobs of this ministry was to pioneer work in many places in this beautiful country where there are no evangelical churches. He is also part of the Lausanne Committee for Spain and on the executive board of an evangelism ministry. Xoán has had the privilege of

sharing the gospel in events, crusades, congresses, etc. in 18 countries. God has been very faithful and good.

When Alfredo Vallellanes told Xoán about Multiplication Network and asked him to become National Coordinator, he realized that, after much prayer, he would be fulfilling God's will for his life by accepting this responsibility. He had been the pastor of a thriving church for many years but is now looking for another pastor to lead the church while he devotes more time to his position as the Spain Director for Multiplication Network.

Xoán attended Multiplication Network's 10th Annual Latin America Conference in Quito, Ecuador in 2016 and was impressed and very motivated by how the Lord was using Multiplication Network to invigorate the Church in so many countries. An entire generation is rising up for the Lord with hope and dedication with the task of sowing and multiplication. God has given the leaders of Multiplication Network a vision they are passionate about and that, inescapably, leads others to take action.

Xoán's prayer request is... "that we please pray for our country, for our people, and for our churches so that we work wholeheartedly toward our Kingdom vision. We pray big prayers to our great God and He is not scared by the size of our prayers. We can make bold decisions and have full confidence in His care and provision."

## MOHAN CHACKO

Dr Mohan Chacko is former Principal and Distinguished Professor of Theology and Mission at Presbyterian Theological Seminary, Dehradun, India. He holds a doctorate degree from the Free University of Amsterdam, the Netherlands. He is an ordained Pastor of the Reformed Presbyterian Church of India. He and his wife have two grown children.



## ROBERT “BOB” CRAFT

Robert Craft has a ministry background of more than 40 years as a pastor, missionary and evangelical missions leader. He is the founder and is serving as the Servant-at-Large (AKA-President) of Reach A Village. He has been working alongside international Christian leaders since 1989.

Bob has been involved in evangelism and discipleship ministry, helping local churches reach out to their own communities and beyond. He has served in ministry throughout Southeast Asia for the past 30 years, helping train local pastors and Christian workers in their efforts to grow and establish new churches. He has also been involved in multiple projects to develop training curriculum as well as discipleship/Bible study curriculum. Bob has a degree in Christian Education from Trevecca Nazarene University and is a graduate of Prairie Bible Institute in Alberta, Canada, with a focus in Bible/Missions. While living in the Philippines, he also continued some graduate courses at Asia-Pacific Nazarene Theological Seminary (APNTS) in Manila, Philippines, related specifically to theology in the Asian context.

Bob founded Reach A Village in 2012 after seeing that hundreds of thousands of villages in Southeast Asia have remained untouched by mission efforts, even though there are Bibles and other resources available in their many local languages. These villages represent more than 2 billion people!

## VASILICA CROITER

Vasilica Croitor is the Executive Director of AREA Romania (The Alliance for Spreading the Gospel at Home). He moved to the southern city of Medgidia in 1997 after graduating from the Pentecostal Theological Institute in Bucharest. He is also one of the founding leaders of APME, the Pentecostal Foreign Missions Agency in Romania, a growing organization that has sent more than 80 full-time missionaries to other nations.

Vasilica is a publisher and author. He has published over 150 books through Succeed Publishing. His own book, *The Redemption of Memory: The Pentecostal Church in the Communist Period*, was awarded *The European Christian Book of the Year 2010*.

He and his wife Mihaela have three children: Denisa, Benjamin, and Miriam.

## LINDA GROSS

Linda Gross is the founder and director of SEAM International. She holds Ph.D and M.A. degrees in Christian and Cultural Apologetics. Linda spent six years in hospital ministry as a Registered Nurse. She has over forty years in cross-cultural ministry, most of it among SE Asians. Besides English, she speaks Thai, White Hmong, and Hebrew.

Linda holds a PhD from Walden University in Public Health. She also holds an M.A. in Communication and Culture from Trinity Evangelical Seminary a B.A. degree from Vanguard University of Southern California and an RN diploma from Hollywood Presbyterian Hospital School of Nursing.

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Teresa Janzen is an oral Bible study teacher and adjunct professor at Nile Theological College in Juba, South Sudan. Janzen holds a Master's in Education (M.Ed.) in Instructional Design and Technology from *West Texas A&M*, in Canyon, Texas, as well as a B.S. and TESOL certificate (Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages) from *Kuyper College* in Grand Rapids, Michigan. She is also a Board-Certified Master Mental Health Coach (BCMMHC) and Train the trainer for Trauma healing. Married to Dan, together they have eight adult children and many grandchildren scattered throughout the USA. Connect with Teresa Janzen at [www.teresajanzen.com](http://www.teresajanzen.com) and on the DrawnOnwarD podcast on your favorite platform.

## ARBIN POKHAREL

Arbin Pokharel is the founding pastor of Cross-Way Church in Kathmandu, Nepal. He is a leader in the church planting movement called Nepali Reformed Church (NRC). He has led a Reformed and Presbyterian Seminary for 20 years. He holds a masters degree (MTS) from Calvin Theological Seminary and a doctorate (DMin) from Fuller Theological Seminary. He is a keen student of the Nepali Church, teaching Nepali Ecclesiology.

## DANIEL SÁNCHEZ

Daniel R. Sánchez is Professor of Missions at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, Director of the Scarborough Institute of Church Planting and Growth, Associate Dean in the Roy Fish School of Evangelism and Missions and President and CEO of Church Starting Network. Sánchez and his wife Carmen have three children. His educational experience includes a BA from Howard Payne University, an MDiv from Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, a DMin from Fuller Theological Seminary and a PhD from the Oxford Centre for Mission Studies, Oxford, England.

His ministry experience includes starting two churches in Texas, serving as a missionary in the Republic of Panama; Academic Dean, Panama Baptist Theological Seminary; Assistant Director, Home Mission Board; Evangelism Director, Baptist Convention of New York; State Missions Director, Baptist Convention of New York; and Professor of Missions, Southwestern Seminary. Among his publications are: *Starting Reproducing Congregations*, 2001; *Sharing The Good News With Roman Catholic Friends*, 2003; *Gospel in the Rosary*, 2003; *Hispanic Realities Impacting America*, 2006; *Church Planting Movements in North America*, ed., 2006; *Bible Storying for Church Planting*, 2008; *Lifestory Conversations*, 2010; and *Worldview: Implications for Missionary Work*, 2012. Sánchez has taught in over 50 countries in Africa, Asia, Europe, Latin America and the Islands of the Pacific.

## HIRALAL SOLANKI

Rev. Hiralal Solanki comes from a Hindu family, and is an ordained minister of the Reformed Presbyterian Church of India. He is currently serving with Indian Reformed Fellowship as Associate Pastoral Coordinator. He has several years of experience in church planting in North India. He holds a Master's degree in Indian Philosophy, and is currently pursuing a PhD in Christian Studies. He is married and has a daughter and a son.

## JEFF STAM

Dr. Jeff Stam is a retired pastor with the Christian Reformed Church of North America and founder of Set Free Ministries. He served as a missionary/church planter in Central America for 8 years and over the last 30 years has taught on the topic of spiritual warfare in over 20 countries. Jeff has a doctorate in Missiology from Trinity Evangelical Divinity School and is the author of *Straight Talk About Spiritual Warfare and Battle of the Angels*. Jeff and his wife, Denise, currently live in Hudsonville, Michigan.

## WESLEY "WES" TABER

Wesley "Wes" Taber was born December 8, 1953 in Mt. Holly, New Jersey, the second of three sons. He grew up in the northeastern U.S. (MA, NY and CT) where his father pastored. Under the godly influence of parents and grandparents, Wes made a profession of faith in the Lord Jesus as a child. He graduated from Houghton College in 1975, committed to serving the Lord "wherever He leads."

Wes joined the Internship Program of Life in Messiah (then known as American Messianic Fellowship), taking Jewish Studies at Moody Bible Institute. He married Lori Currie (also a "preacher's kid") in May 1976. Their first field assignment (1976-1980 in Miami/Miami Beach, FL) included Jewish evangelism, discipleship and equipping believers to reach Jewish people in very diverse communities.

In the autumn of 1980, the Taber family relocated their ministry to Jerusalem, Israel. The focus of effort was on relational evangelism and working with the indigenous church. Wes took courses related to Biblical and Judaic studies at the Hebrew University; both he and Lori learned Modern Hebrew.

Returning to the U.S. In June 1982, Wes became Chicago Area Director and took graduate studies at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School. In May 1987 Wes began serving as Life in Messiah's Associate Director. He was ordained by Grace Fellowship Church of Lansing, Illinois, in July 1992.

Wes served as Executive Director of Life in Messiah International from January 1990 until August 2019. Today he serves as LIFE's Global Ambassador under the leadership of Executive Director Levi Hazen; Lori remains LIFE's Administrative Director. Wes and Lori have four married children and nine grandchildren.

## GARY TEJA

Dr. Gary Teja studied missions at Reformed Bible Institute (today Kuyper College). He earned a B.A. degree from Western Michigan University in Spanish with a minor in Latin American Studies, holds an M.A. degree from Wheaton College Graduate School in Missions and Intercultural Studies, and earned a PhD in adult learning and distance education from Michigan State University.

Dr. Teja worked with church plants in Western Michigan, ministered among Mexican migrants in Minnesota, and served in Nicaragua and Costa Rica as a church planting missionary for Christian Reformed World Missions. During that time, Dr. Teja also worked in Theological Education by Extension (TEE) in training new pastors, elders, and deacons for the emerging churches. He was also director of distance education for the Missiological Institute of the Americas in San Jose, Costa Rica. Back in the United States, Dr. Teja worked in curriculum development at CRC Publications, later served as the

director of Hispanic ministry, and participated as a member of the team giving oversight for all new church plants in the U.S. and Canada for the denomination.

Dr. Teja served as director of an online M.A. in church planting at Calvin Theological Seminary and as associate professor and academic dean of distance education at Kuyper College.

More recently, Dr. Teja served in various capacities at Bible League International: director of Eastern Europe, director of the Americas, and director of Muslim ministry development. In 2012, Dr. Teja joined Multiplication Network as its first International Ministry Director and now as Vice President of Global Ministry.

Dr. Teja has written, co-authored, or edited more than a dozen books, and also serves as an adjunct professor at various seminaries in the U.S. and Latin America. Dr. Teja's specialization has been in mentoring pastors and church planters over the course of his years in active ministry.

## **CRAIG VAN GELDER**

Craig Van Gelder, Ph.D. is Professor Emeritus of Congregational Mission at Luther Seminary having taught there from 1998-2014; previously Professor of Domestic Missiology at Calvin Seminary from 1988-1998. He taught courses in mission to North America, church vitalization, evangelism, and congregational leadership. Craig also served as a consultant to churches in areas of assessment and strategic planning, organizational and leadership development and engaging in adaptive change.

## **JUAN WAGENVELD**

Juan Wagenveld is the founder and Executive Director of Multiplication Network, an organization that provides modular training to thousands of church planters around the world. The

vision is to see a sustained and systematic church planter training ministry with low cost and high impact serving ten thousand church planters worldwide each year.

John grew up in Argentina, the son of missionary parents. He studied theology at Dordt College, Missions and Church Growth at Calvin Theological Seminary, and holds a Doctor of Ministry degree from Trinity Evangelical Divinity School.

John served for seven years as a church planter and professor in Puerto Rico for Christian Reformed World Missions. He authored a Spanish book on church development and edited another on church planting. The Church Multiplication Training Center invited him to lead Church Planter Bootcamps as a volunteer.

John then served in several positions at Bible League International, including as Executive Director of International Ministry where he led regional leaders with over 700 staff in Africa, Asia, Latin America, and Eastern Europe.

John transitioned to give full-time leadership to Multiplication Network in 2010 and in 2015 he co-edited *Planting Healthy Churches* with his mentor, Dr. Gary Teja.

John speaks English, Spanish and French and has traveled to over 100 countries. He lives in Michigan and in his free time plays soccer, rides bike with his wife, Angela and spends time with his four children.

Multiplication Network envisions a healthy church representing the kingdom of God in every community. To do this, Christian leaders are trained and equipped to strengthen and multiply healthy churches.



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