

asian missions advance

87

Spring 2025 | Volume 31 | Issue 2

ISSN 2765-0936

Quarterly Bulletin of the Asia Missions Association *published by*
the East-West Center for Missions Research & Development

Story, Song, Concept: Mission and the Three Dimensions of Culture

Howard A. Snyder

Three missionaries worked together as a team in a remote country where there had been little Gospel witness. One missionary mainly told stories about Jesus and the Good News of God's reign. One wrote and sang songs that communicated well in the host culture. The third missionary worked hard to understand the indigenous worldview and its worldstory. He became skillful in articulating Christian theology in categories that reached deeply into the philosophical underpinnings of the people he was working with.

This was an effective team. Each member's work helped enrich that of the other two. The three did better together than any one of them could have done by themselves. These three missionaries might have been men or they might have been women. In this story, they could have been either or both.

And the ministry flourished! Many men and women and children from across the host culture came to know Jesus Christ and their Savior and Lord, becoming faithful disciples who walked in the ways of Jesus—as the Gospel teaches. Churches were born and multiplied, and a wide diversity of spiritual gifts were awakened within the new churches, broadening Gospel witness into many sectors of the culture.

This mission initiative redemptively combined these three dynamics: Story, song, and concept. It was like a threefold cord not quickly broken. Combining multiple dimensions of culture, this mission proved more redemptively transformative than any one of these would have been by itself.

This article is an invitation to consider how mission can be effective by recognizing and combining or "synergizing" the various aspects and dynamics of culture.

From beginning to end, from Creation to New Creation and beyond, the Christian story is the

story of culture. This means that Christian mission, beginning to end, is the story of cultural engagement, cultural dynamics, cultural conflict, and cultural transformation.

Culture is an inevitable result of creation itself. It is a fruit of God's covenant relationship with his creation, with both people and the Earth. It is helpful therefore to examine culture and the cultural implications and dimensions of the Gospel. The Gospel's impact on culture and culture's impact on the Gospel are pressing issues of Christian discipleship and witness.

Two bad things happen if we ignore culture: We become blind to dimensions of our present culturally-

CONTENTS

- 1 Story, Song, Concept: Mission and the Three Dimensions of Culture**
Howard A. Snyder
- 9 Reimagining Contextualization**
Edward Kim
- 13 Sex Trafficking and Slavery in the Christian Church**
James D. Langteau, Timothy D. Dunham, and Kenneth D. Gossett
- 22 Is the Local Church "Really Nice but Totally Unnecessary"?**
John Edmiston
- 28 BOOK REVIEW: Following Christ and Confucius: Wang Mingdao and Chinese Christianity**
Stephen Panda Bamboo

embedded life that have important discipleship implications, and we live with a scaled-down picture of the life to come (as we will see). We run the risk of unrecognized idolatry in our present life as well as a flat, sterile view of eternal life.

Biblical teachings however are *transcultural*.¹ They apply everywhere. But the ways they are understood and expressed in culture can vary greatly. Sin and evil can look different in different cultural settings. Sin infects and affects not only persons, but every fiber of a culture or social group. Salvation also touches every dimension of culture, creating a *new social and cultural reality* as well as a new spiritual one. Salvation touches every dimension of human existence. Churches take on varied cultural forms depending on context. Church structures themselves are cultural objects and must be culturally understood and evaluated.

WHAT IS CULTURE?

Culture is the word we use to signify the results of humans' interaction with each other and with the environment over time. Culture involves such things as what we eat, the materials we use for shelter and clothing, how we communicate, and myriad other dynamics such as music, art, group organization, stories, and religion.

Definition

Given this realization, I define culture in a more comprehensive way than is often done. Culture means all the ways human beings interact with each other, with their physical environment, and with the unseen environment.

Culture is first of all physical objects and ecologies, because on these all human life rests. Every cultural artifact comes first from the Earth. It is made first of physical things—objects and living creatures found in and shaped from the particular environments where people live. Wood, rocks, shells, paint, glass; ants, worms, eagles, lions; things both living and inanimate—all these are “stuff” and building blocks of culture. These objects and artifacts then emerge symbolically as art. Think of the hundreds of amazing cave paintings at Lascaux and Chauvet-Pont-d’Arc in southwestern France, some dating back more than 30,000 years—remarkable images of deer, horses, lions, and other creatures, many in color and depicting animals in motion. Other cultures may have their own ancient objects of art and music.

As we humans interact with physical things, we make culture. We make choices in how we use and shape things. We create cultural objects and ideas, developing tools, thoughts, symbols, music, and many other cultural artifacts. Earthly culture is physical-thing-dependent. Human culture varies with weather,

terrain, and available food, water, and building materials.

We easily forget how *physical* culture is. Say “culture” and we think of art and literature and orchestras, or maybe science and philosophies and customs—not dirt. Yet culture mostly rises from the soil.

Is there anything more cultural than food, grown in the ground? —the whole vast world of agriculture. Much that we call culture begins with agriculture.² Agriculture is of course prominent in the Old Testament, and thus also in the New, as in Jesus' parables. The “good land” God gave Israel, “a land with flowing streams,” was “a land of wheat and barley, of vines and fig trees and pomegranates, a land of olive trees and honey” (Deut 8:7-8). When Israel flourished in faithfulness to God's covenant, it was well supplied with “meal, cakes of figs, clusters of raisins, wine, oil, oxen, and sheep,” and many other fruits of the land (1 Chron 12:40).

So culture is agriculture. And equally, culture is music. Music and singing too are deeply rooted dimensions of culture. Musical instruments are made from physical things. Even music itself connects with the sounds of creation, as Bernie Krause shows in *The Great Animal Orchestra: Finding the Origins of Music in the World's Wild Places*.

In this sense culture reflects the intimate creation-connection between God, people, and the Earth. God's Earth covenant, revealed in Genesis 9, underlies culture.

Physical things like hills and fruits and rocks and animals become the raw material of language, which builds up analogies and metaphors and ideas, which shape thought and stories, which grow into literature, music, dance, spirituality and more, and thus over time arise as culture. Take away material things and the “natural” world (that is, creation), and culture collapses.

Culture grows like a tree; sings like a bird; rolls like thunder; uses tools like hoes and violins, all made from the stuff nature provides. From the Earth.

This physical, material side of culture is so omnipresent that, like air, we often don't see it. The physical becomes invisible. Yet it never *really* disappears. Physical culture always is present. Physical things are ever-present in fact, in the Gospel, and in church and mission, just as they are from the first to the last page of Scripture—from “Let there be light” (Gen 1:3) to “tree of life” (Rev 22:19).

Good theology and discipleship remind us of this. The Bible reveals God's concern for physical things. Reading Scripture however, we get so used to sheep, fig trees, sandals, fish, grass, vines, and so forth that we stop *seeing* them. Looking for invisible spiritual things, we miss the visible. This is a form

1. See William J. Webb, *Slaves, Women and Homosexuals: Exploring the Hermeneutics of Cultural Analysis* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2001), Chapter 3, “Cultural/Transcultural Analysis: A Road Map,” 67-70, and note the references to Webb's analysis in Chapter 3 of this present book.

2. See for example Wendell Berry's many works, particularly *The Unsettling of America: Culture and Agriculture* (New York: Avon Books, 1978); *The Gift of Good Land* (New York: North Point Press, 1981); *Bringing It to the Table: On Farming and Food* (Berkeley, CA: Counterpoint, 2009).

of unbiblical dualism. We may mistakenly think that Jesus’ parables teach only *spiritual* lessons; have only heavenly meanings.

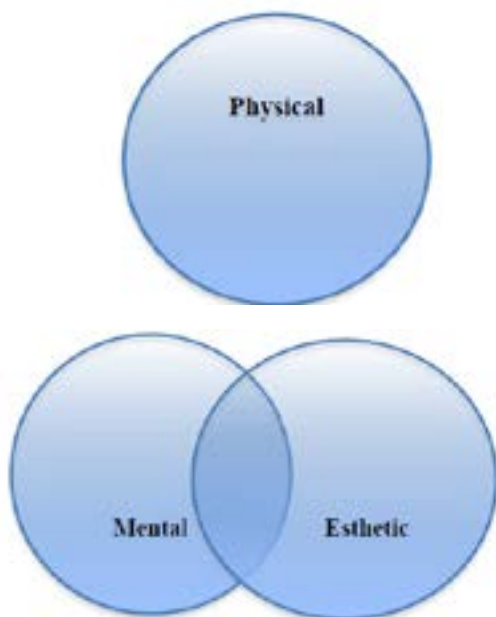
Christian life and mission always happen within one or many cultures. Faithful discipleship works with and within culture, not against it. Following Jesus means cooperating with the Spirit’s work of bringing all things into harmony with Jesus Christ. Faithful Christian mission neither ignores culture nor dominates or poisons it. Living as salt and light and leaven in the world, Jesus followers appreciate and enjoy all things good in culture, seeking meanwhile to redeem and enrich it. So “whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things” (Phil 4:8).

Three Dimensions of Culture

All the threads of culture intertwine—physical, social, spiritual, intellectual, esthetic, economic, scientific, whatever. For ease in analysis, let’s view them in three parallel groups—*material/physical*, *mental/intellectual*, and *esthetic/imaginative*—with typical examples:

Material/Physical	Mental/Intellectual	Esthetic/Imaginative
Food	Language	Music
Tools	Literature	Art
Clothing	Science	Drama
Houses	Philosophy	Poetry
Plants/animals	Ideas/concepts	Images/intuitions
Physical gifts/skills (e.g., carpentry)	Mental gifts/skills (e.g., speaking)	Esthetic gifts/skills (e.g., singing)

These of course overlap, interact, interpenetrate, so may be pictured as circles or spheres:



The interaction is of course much more intimate than pictured here; in fact—culturally and neurologically—there is no way to isolate one from the others. Think of

the complexity of the human brain.

One way or another, all these dimensions are necessary for human life. So all become artifacts of culture. We may not think of plants and animals, or the physical Earth itself, as part of culture. But they are, for they shape human behavior in physical, intellectual, and esthetic ways (food, ideas, beauty). So we speak of agri-culture.

This three-part distinction—physical, mental, esthetic—is illuminating, though somewhat artificial. Culture is a kind of ecosystem. All things intertwine and overlap. Carpentry requires mental and esthetic skills as well as physical ones. Singing has physical and mental dimensions (mind and vocal cords). Tools can be mental and imaginative as well as physical. Yet the distinctions are useful. They point out the breadth of culture; the importance and engagement of all these dimensions.

We can watch all these in Jesus’ life. The Son of Man ate and digested food, wore clothing, rode in boats, and practiced carpentry (material culture). He spoke, read, taught, and could write (mental culture). He sang, recited poetry, and told stories (esthetic culture). He enjoyed all these dimensions when uncorrupted, and grieved when he found them corrupted. “Look at the lilies of the field, how they grow!” (Mt 6:28 paraphrased). A wholesome understanding of Jesus, the Gospel, and Christian witness requires attention to all dimensions of culture. This the Bible shows us.

1. Material/Physical Culture

Material/physical culture plays a big role in Scripture. The early chapters of Genesis tell of the variety and abundance of the physical universe, including sun, moon and stars, and all living creatures. Later chapters speak of rivers, mountains, deserts, fruit, gold, bronze, iron, cities, cypress wood, mandrakes, stones, bricks, swords, salt, bitumen, money, silver cups, altars—and this is just a start.

Trees especially play a key role. Matthew Sleeth astutely notes, “Every important character and every major event [in the Bible] has a tree marking the spot. There is a tree in the first and last chapter of the Bible, in the first psalm, and in the first gospel.” And similarly in dozens of other places throughout the biblical books.³ Trees are first of all physical, then quickly become symbols and metaphors.

The central symbol of Jesus’ atonement—the cross, made from a tree—is a material cultural artifact with its own history in human culture. Though it is much more, its very physicalness is a key part of its meaning.

God’s plan is that his whole living creation “be fruitful and multiply” (Gen 1:22, 1:28), and that the desert “blossom as the rose” (Isa 35:1). God intends the flourishing of his whole creation. This is consistent with the way each part was designed—its inbuilt

3. Matthew Sleeth, *Reforesting Faith: What Trees Teach Us About the Nature of God and His Love for Us* (New York: Waterbrook / Random House, 2019), 5.

capacities and purposes; the genetic and esthetic potential of every atom and cell. The interactive, ecological relationship of every bit of creation, human and nonhuman, with every other part—this is the divine design.

God wants children, women, and men to fulfill their own unique roles. You and I gain from the beauty and abundance of the material world. We are commissioned to contribute to its thriving, using the Earth creatively for good and beneficent purposes and the glory of God.

2. Intellectual/Mental Culture

Humans create, enjoy, and benefit from the intellectual and mental “things” of culture—ideas, literature, science, and much else. Here also women and men reflect God’s image.

To most people, *culture* means mainly the intellectual and esthetic artifacts we have developed and continue to create. The Scriptures do of course speak of intellectual/mental culture. The Bible itself, as inspired divine revelation, is an intellectual artifact consisting of words, ideas, and various kinds of literature. It is also a physical object, consisting of word-images on stone (the Ten Commandments), papyrus, parchment (from animal skins), cloth, wood, glass, printed paper, and today various electronic and digital forms.

Human intellectual culture includes thousands of languages. Several of these are mentioned in the Bible, itself first composed in Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek.

The Bible refers to the intellectual culture of other peoples, not just the Hebrews. We read of the language and learning of the Egyptians (Moses), the Babylonians (Dan 1:4, 17), and the Greeks and Romans (Paul). Jesus apparently spoke and read Hebrew, Greek, and Aramaic. He was familiar with the various kinds of literature of the Hebrew people. He was fully immersed in and a part of the intellectual/mental culture of his day. Not being so would have hampered his mission.

God’s plan is that all the aspects of intellectual and mental culture be used for human good, the care and flourishing of creation, and to glorify God. Jesus’ strategy was to bring people into reconciliation with God and the rest of creation so that “in all things” God might be glorified in heaven and on Earth and his creation purposes beautifully fulfilled (1 Pet 4:11).

3. Esthetic/Imaginative Culture

Esthetic/imaginative culture means music, dance, art, drama, poetry, and a range of other gifts and skills.

Not surprisingly, this kind of culture plays a big role in Scripture. Much of the Bible is poetry. Music is mentioned often. The exodus was immediately celebrated by the Israelites singing praise to the Lord (Ex 15:1-19). “Then the prophetess Miriam, Aaron’s sister, took a tambourine in her hand; and all the women went out after her with tambourines and with

dancing. And Miriam sang to them: ‘Sing to the Lord, for he has triumphed gloriously; horse and rider he has thrown into the sea’” (Ex 15:20-21).

Singing and musical instruments pop up often in Scripture. King David would “improvise on instruments of music” (Amos 6:5). Solomon composed one thousand five songs (1 Kgs 4:32). Singing was always a major part of worship in the Jerusalem temple. Under King David “there was a leader of the singers, and there were songs of praise and thanksgiving to God” (Neh 12:46). God’s people are to “tell of [the Lord’s] deeds with songs of joy” (Ps 107:22). The Bible also mentions “the song of fools” (Eccl 7:15)!

Isaiah writes, “Sing to the Lord a new song, his praise from the end of the earth!” (Isa 42:10).

Jesus closed the Last Supper with a hymn (Mt 26:30; Mk 14:26). The New Testament church sang “psalms and hymns and spiritual songs” together, “singing and making melody to the Lord” (Eph 5:19). When Christians are joyful, they “should sing songs of praise” (Jas 5:13). Paul and Silas sang hymns in prison at midnight despite wounds from a severe beating (Acts 16:22-25).

The New Creation is full of song! God’s redeemed multitudes in heaven sing “the song of Moses, the servant of God, and the song of the Lamb: ‘Great and amazing are your deeds, Lord God the Almighty! Just and true are your ways, King of the nations! . . . All nations will come and worship before you, for your judgments have been revealed’” (Rev 15:3-4).

Imagination as well as reason enlivens the whole of Scripture. Jesus’ parables are intriguingly imaginative. So are the metaphors and images biblical characters use to communicate the Good News, as well as God’s judgments. Biblical books like Ezekiel, Daniel, and Revelation—examples of what is called *apocalyptic* literature—are known especially for their use of imaginative images and strange creatures.

God intends that all aspects of esthetic/imaginative culture contribute to human wellbeing, the health and flourishing of creation, and God’s glory. Imagination and the various forms of art help us reach beyond the limits of human reason and begin to grasp “the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that [we] may be filled with all the fullness of God” (Eph 3:18-19).

What about faith and spirituality? How do they relate to culture? It would be unbiblical to make faith and things of the spirit a *separate category* from other forms of culture. Too often this is done. The temptation is strong to split spirit and matter into separate spheres. *The world created by God is one*. All dimensions are ecologically intermixed and mutually, symbiotically interdependent. Faith and discipleship are physical because we and the world we inhabit are physical. Jesus’ incarnation and resurrection were and remain physical. Hence the New Creation is at one and the same time both physical and spiritual.

Faith, discipleship, and mission are also mental and intellectual. Sometimes in Christian history this has been overemphasized; other times, unrecognized. The healthy biblical balance is a harmonious weaving together of the physical, mental, and imaginative dimensions of faith in our daily walk with God in the Spirit. For discipleship is indeed esthetic and imaginative. Faith gets richer as imagination and art are woven into our Christian life, understanding, and witness.

Vital faith and witness grow through a healthy, God-endowed blending of all dimensions of culture—material/physical, intellectual/mental, and esthetic/imaginative. Body, mind, and spirit.

Walter Isaacson, biographer of Leonardo da Vinci, Benjamin Franklin, Albert Einstein, Steve Jobs, and others, says history's most creative people display "the ability to make connections across disciplines—arts and sciences, humanities and technology." This is a "key to innovation, imagination, and genius," springing from "a joyful instinct to fathom the profound beauties of creation."⁴ Isaacson writes mainly of Western culture, but the same thing is true all around the world, in all cultures. Some people are especially gifted in blending these various dimensions. Jesus did, above all! Yet each of us shares these dimensions of culture in some measure.

A fully healthy culture requires full and equal participation of both women and men. Culture is also enriched by difference and diversity. Capacities of analysis and intuition, as well as insight into physical things, differ greatly across the spectrum of gender and cultures. Often women seem more intuitive and men more analytical. Sometimes the opposite appears true. Some cultures seem more attuned to imagination and esthetics; others more slanted toward reason and analysis. The point is, *all these capacities are God's gift*, equally part of the precious image of God in human being.

Not only societies but also churches become more creative and dynamic the more diverse they are. The more attuned they are also to the *Earth*—not just to things of mind and spirit—the more wholesome and life-giving they are.

CULTURE, WORLDVIEW, WORLDSTORY

Cultures are webbed together by a shared worldview. Or they may become fragmented as conflicting worldviews clash.

Worldview is the grid we use to make sense of the cosmos. It is a set of silent assumptions we hold as we navigate life's currents. It is our "sense of the world"—the framework that tells us what is true and important and what is not.

Worldviews answer questions of right and wrong and serve as the basis for countless daily decisions. James Sire defines worldview as "a set

4. Walter Isaacson, *Leonardo da Vinci* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2017), 2-3.

of presuppositions (or assumptions) which we hold (consciously or unconsciously) about the basic makeup of our world." Worldviews are "composed of a number of basic presuppositions, more or less self-consistent, generally unquestioned by each person, rarely, if ever, mentioned to one's friends, and only brought to mind when challenged by a foreigner from another ideological universe."⁵

A worldview is our key to the universe. It is the lens through which we see. A credible worldview resolves life's key puzzles:

1. Is there purpose to life? If so, what?
2. What is the design of the universe?
3. How does my life relate to other people, to history, and to the universe?
4. Where is history going? Is there an end or goal?

These are the questions of *purpose, design, relationships, and the future*. They deal with the meaning (if any) of life in all its actual and potential dimensions.

Livable worldviews are really *worldstories*. We need not so much a world *view* as a world *story*—a coherent, meaningful tale that we inhabit and that gives purpose and direction to life. The issue is not just how we see the world, but how we experience it; live in its story; find the meaning of our own story there. In the Christian faith, human existence is a story with a future, and the story is not over yet. We find meaning in our own lives as we discover our true identity in Jesus Christ and his body, the church, and in Jesus' promises and kingdom vision.

A big part of Christian discipleship is growing into the Christian story—learning to live and understand as best we can the Christian worldstory, "the breadth and length and height and depth" of God's revelation and "the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge" (Eph 3:18-19). Faithfully following Jesus who both is and embodies the story. This is a key concern of this article—that Jesus' followers today may not only have vital faith in God and hope for the future, but live in the world as agents of the kingdom of God on Earth.⁶

Good and Evil in Culture

Is culture good or bad? Or is it amoral, neutral, standing outside questions of right and wrong?

Culture includes *all* the ways people relate to one other, all the ways they influence each other and are shaped by the world around them, whether physical, social, or spiritual. This means culture shares in both good and evil.

Human beings are created in God's image, and humans create culture. Culture therefore partakes of, reflects, and can magnify all the good that is found in human personality. But human culture also magnifies horrible evil in the world. The world's great art

5. James W. Sire, *The Universe Next Door: A Basic World View Catalog* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1976), 17-18.

6. For more on culture, worldviews, worldstory, and related issues, see Howard A. Snyder, *EarthCurrents: The Struggle for the World's Soul* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995), especially chapters 10-20.

displays much of the good found in women and men, and sometimes the evil. Human brutality, injustice, and passive tolerance of wickedness reflect fallen sinfulness. Look at scenes of Jesus' crucifixion!

A big part of Christian discipleship is growing into the Christian story—learning to live and understand as best we can the Christian world story, “the breadth and length and height and depth” of God’s revelation and “the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge” (Eph 3:18-19). Faithfully following Jesus who both is and embodies the story. This is a key concern of this article—that Jesus’ followers today may not only have vital faith in God and hope for the future, but live in the world as agents of the kingdom of God on Earth.

In the United States, we see wickedness in the evils of racism—the lingering poisonous fruit of slavery bringing countless horrible deaths to men, women, and children through lynchings, burnings, drownings, and other forms of violence over two and more centuries. This is on top of centuries of genocidal violence against literally hundreds of indigenous tribes—Cherokee, Potawatomi, Navajo, Illinois, Seneca, Massachusetts, Miami, Sioux, and dozens of others.⁷

In the twentieth century, Nazi death camps in World War II and genocide Cambodia, Rwanda, and elsewhere showed how evil a society can become. And now our twenty-first century already offers many horrendous examples—not just of evil generally, but of evil deeply entrenched in culture.⁸ The genocidal treatment of the great Uyghur people in China, the Rohingyas in Burma (Myanmar), and religious and ethnic minorities in many other lands shows how widespread this evil is.

Sin affects and infects culture as it does human persons. As with people, some cultures are morally better and others worse. The same principle applies to the internet and all forms of social media. The internet reflects and intensifies both the good and the bad in culture. It has great potential in both directions. This is its promise and its peril.

7. See Howard A. Snyder, *Jesus and Pocahontas: Gospel, Mission, and National Myth* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2015; Cambridge, UK: Lutterworth Press, 2015).

8. Unfortunately such tales of culturally-embedded evil can be found throughout all human history, as well as in the Bible.

Human culture is thus both good and evil. Culture reflects the best and worst of humankind. Over time and in varying contexts human society can magnify the good and diminish the evil, or feed the evil and starve the good.

Looking at cultures around the world and through past ages, we see moral as well as material similarities and differences. Some cultures have flourished over millennia. Others have declined, been destroyed, or gone extinct. In his book *Sick Societies*, anthropologist Robert Edgerton describes cultures that died or suffered greatly due to unhealthy practices or beliefs. Certain “customs and social institutions in all societies . . . compromise human well-being,” Edgerton notes—things like witchcraft, revenge, slavery, infanticide, human sacrifice, torture, female genital mutilation, male domination, rape, feuding, and environmental pollution, among others. Such cultural practices or beliefs “can threaten social survival.”⁹

Edgerton writes as an anthropologist, not a Christian. But we see immediately that all the practices he lists violate biblical teachings and the ethics of God’s reign. While societies may be “devastated by events beyond their control,” Edgerton notes, they may also *destroy themselves* through “beliefs, values, and social institutions that result in senseless cruelty, needless suffering, and monumental folly in their relations among themselves and with other societies and the physical environment.” “Traditional beliefs and practices may be useful, . . . but they may also be inefficient, harmful and even deadly.”¹⁰

Edgerton notes that “supernatural beliefs can aid a population in its quest for understanding, explanation, or reassurance, but such beliefs can also contribute to a society’s demise.” He cites witchcraft and religious wars, especially. “A desire for revenge can also destroy a society.”¹¹

Edgerton tells of a small tribe in the rainforest of eastern Bolivia. The people showed little love or concern for others in their tribe. They hid food from each other. They abandoned children and elderly folk when they fell ill. They had no clothing, and were often cold and wet. “Hungry, fearful, physically uncomfortable, and without concern for one another,” tribe members “did not live long and did not live well.”¹² Climate was an obvious factor. But if the tribe had known and lived by the Gospel, their lives could have improved dramatically.

For our purposes, three points are equally important here: 1) cultures reflect both the good and the evil in human beings. 2) Conversely, culture shapes the moral sense and values of its people, for good or evil. 3) Like people, cultures can gradually become morally better or worse, just as they can become more or less prosperous materially. They can destroy themselves

9. Robert B. Edgerton, *Sick Societies: Challenging the Myth of Primitive Harmony* (New York: The Free Press, 1992), 1.

10. Edgerton, *Sick Societies*, 15.

11. Edgerton, *Sick Societies*, 172, 178.

12. Edgerton, *Sick Societies*, 12-13.

through beliefs and practices that morally, socially, or ecologically are bad or even suicidal. Any person born into a sick society is inescapably harmed and limited by that society.

God's intent with culture, as with people, is that they thrive through a healthy covenant relationship with God, one another, and the Earth. This is basic biblical worldview.

Implications for Mission Practice Today

It will help us be more effective, more redemptive in mission, if we grasp these dimensions of culture and implement this understanding in practical ways.

Three implications:

1. *With this three-dimensional understanding, mission reaches more comprehensively into the various aspects of culture.* The Gospel reaches better into the imaginative and esthetic sectors of culture, not just into the cognitive, intellectual, or more obviously spiritual or religious aspects.
2. *Employing this three-dimensional lens, we broaden the missionary call, the missional opportunities.* We expand the number of missionaries as we see that mission involves a much broader range of spiritual gifts than we may have thought.
3. *In this way, mission becomes more complete and wholistic, more fully transformative.* With a broad cultural understanding of mission, we learn how the Gospel transforms not only the mind, but also the imagination, the emotions, the artistic and musical dimension of people's lives. It better reaches not only "intellectuals" but also artists and musicians and dreamers.

Mission in tri-dimensional practice reaches the culture more deeply and more broadly. And this means more permanently. For culture is carried from generation to generation not only by word and thought, but also by music, art, stories, architecture, agricultural practices, and even by dreams and fantasies.

Culture is carried and transmitted by women equally with men; by children and youth, and by the corps of elders. By proverbs, humor, games, and even play.

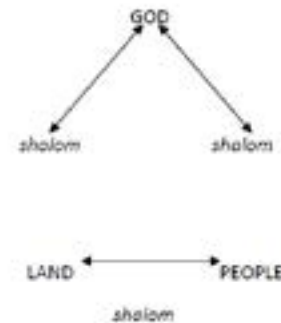
Mission in tri-dimensional perspective thus better matches and fulfills the comprehensive biblical Economy of God. Biblically, the economy of God leads to everlasting ongoing creativity, beauty, joy, and flourishing of all creation. God's economy—the complete Gospel plan—promises a healed, restored "new heavens and a new earth" (Isa 65:17, 66:22; 2 Pet 3:13). The key Old Testament word for peace, shalom, means comprehensive well-being—healthy people in a thriving land.

Paul writes, "Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have died. . . . Christ the first fruits, then at his coming those who belong to Christ" (1 Cor 15:20, 23). Jesus Christ is the firstfruits of what is coming. In the end, the tree of

life continually flourishes with nourishing fruit and "leaves . . . for the healing of the nations" (Rev 22:2).

So Jesus is the prototype as well the redemptive basis of New Creation. He is the bridge and river of coherence between the visible and invisible worlds (Col 1:17).

In the Old Testament, we learn that through Israel God begins a plan to restore creation. God intends shalom, a harmonious, reconciled interrelationship between himself, his people, and the land. The relationships God establishes and intends to fulfil, according to the Bible, look like this:



In the biblical narrative, God creates "the heavens and the earth" (Gen 1:1); he creates humans and places them on Earth; and God plants a garden for the enjoyment and sustenance of the human community. This is a perfect picture of shalom, of the proper mutual relationship between God, humanity, and the Earth.

This perfect ecology of shalom is beautifully captured in a key Old Testament image of Israel at peace: "They shall all sit under their own vines and under their own fig trees, and no one shall make them afraid" (Mic 4:4). In a measure this happened under King Solomon, when "Israel lived in safety, . . . all of them under their vines and fig trees" (1 Kgs 4:25). But this didn't last. Later, with Israel's destruction and exile, the image becomes an eschatological promise of the kingdom of God in fullness, as in Micah 4:4 and also Zechariah 3:10, "On that day, says the Lord of hosts, you shall invite each other to come under your vine and fig tree." Here is true shalom, peaceful and fruitful harmony between God, people, and the land. Sitting under your own vines and fig trees is a basic biblical image of creation healed.¹³

This Old Testament picture underlies the story of Jesus Messiah in the New Testament. Through the Gospel by the Spirit, God is fulfilling his long intention to bring *shalom* to his whole creation. The Gospel kingdom of God promise encompasses all peoples and the whole Earth. The fulfillment of the Good News of Jesus is creation healed.

Biblically then, salvation means creation healed. And even more, salvation means creation flourishing.

13. Similarly, the devastation of vines and fig trees becomes an image of judgment: The enemy "shall eat up your vines and your fig trees" (Jer. 5:17); "I will lay waste her vines and her fig trees" (Hos 2:12)—which in turn illuminates some of Jesus' actions and parables. See also 2 Kgs 18:31, 1 Macc 14:12.

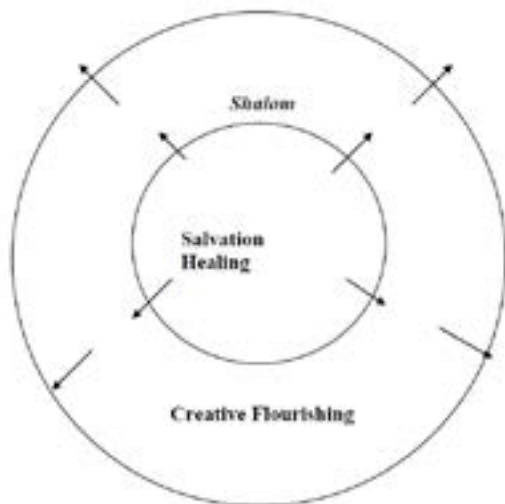
When we fall ill, we hope to be healed not just so we can survive, but so we can thrive. So we can continue to develop, to create, to grow in wisdom, to help others, to more fully glorify God—to flourish in all the ways God provides. So also in the larger picture of God’s plan and purpose. God’s economy is more than salvation as commonly understood, more than creation healed. It is creation flourishing unendingly to God’s glory. God’s work is not just restorative. It is creative, generative, beautifully bountiful.

Salvation is not just reversing direction, not a mere return to the starting point. The plan is to liberate all creation for God’s original and unending project. Rather than just a return to square one, salvation means freeing creation to move and expand everlastingly in the opposite—that is, the right, good, beautiful, and bountiful—direction.

Salvation means creation healed. But shalom in fullness means ongoing health, beauty, creativity, and even more, with many wondrous surprises. It means all creation reaching its full good, glorious, pure, and poetic, artful potential. What this means fully, no one knows! Except Holy Trinity. “No eye has seen, no ear heard, no mind has conceived what God has prepared for those who love him” (1 Cor 2:9 NIV).

The economy of God is the flourishing of creation in all its complexity. God’s economy is cultural, political, economic, ecological, symbiotic. Every dimension included. Because the economy of God is spiritual in the full biblical sense, it is therefore cultural, economic, artistic, political, musical, all according to Yahweh’s original and ongoing intention.

The larger picture, then, looks a bit like this:



From Creation Healed to Creation Flourishing
How big is God’s oikos and oikonomia?

The economy of God brings a complete cure—and more. Colin Gunton expressed this beautifully in his little book *Christ and Creation*: “What is the end of creation? That all things may through being perfected praise the one who made them.” He added, “what we call redemption is not a new end, but the achievement of the original purpose of creation. . . . What is

realized in the incarnate involvement of the Son in time and space is the *redirection of the creation to its original destiny*, a destiny that was from the beginning in Christ, for all creation is through and to the Son.”¹⁴

Thus the full economy of God leads to the everlasting ongoing creativity, beauty, joy, and flowering of all creation. The full reality of this is beyond our grasp, as Paul suggests in 1 Corinthians 2:9. Its fullest biblical picture is in Revelation 21:

I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, “See, the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them as their God; they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them; he will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away.” And the one who was seated on the throne said, “See, I am making all things new.” Also he said, “Write this, for these words are trustworthy and true.” Then he said to me, “It is done! I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. To the thirsty I will give water as a gift from the spring of the water of life. Those who conquer will inherit these things, and I will be their God and they will be my children” (Rev 21:3-7).

This is the economy of God viewed from the climax, looking back.

14. Colin E. Gunton, *Christ and Creation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), 94-96 (emphasis added). This reflects Jn 1, Col 1, and Heb 1, especially.

* This article is adapted from Chapter 9 of *Consider the Lilies: How Jesus Saves People and the Land, the Theology and Ecology of Salvation* (First Fruits Press, Asbury Theological Seminary, 2025).



Howard A. Snyder
has@wineskins.net

Howard A. Snyder was professor of history and theology of mission at Asbury Theological Seminary, Wilmore, Kentucky, USA. Now retired, he continues to write on mission and theology. His latest books are *Francis of Assisi, Mission Maker: The Unconventional Leadership of a Simple Saint* (Orbis Books, 2024), and *Consider the Lilies: How Jesus Saves People and the Land, the Theology and Ecology of Salvation* (First Fruits Press, Asbury Theological Seminary, 2025).

Reimagining Contextualization: A 21st-Century Paradigm for Missiological Strategy in Globalized AI Era

Edward Kim

INTRODUCTION

As we are living in the first quarter of the 21st century, our world has been drastically transformed by technology and globalization. In the field of the global Christian mission, Contextualization in missiology, which refers to adapting the Christian message to different cultural contexts while maintaining its core truths, became particularly prominent in the latter half of the 20th century. This period saw significant social, political, and religious transformations, which affected how the Gospel was communicated across diverse cultures. The term 'contextualization' was coined by Shoki Coe in 1972. He was influential in integrating cultural relevance into theological education, especially through his leadership in the Theological Education Fund (TEF).¹ After Coe, the concept of contextualization got developed and applied in the global mission fields so fast.

A significant contributor to the academic discussion of contextualization, Paul Hiebert developed the "critical contextualization" model. In his article "Critical Contextualization" published in the *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* (1987), Hiebert outlines a process that involves making the Gospel understandable and applicable in a given cultural context without compromising its essential meaning.² This definition aligns with his broader work, suggesting that in the book, contextualization is likely defined as the process of adapting the Christian message to a specific cultural setting, ensuring it resonates with the audience while preserving its theological integrity.

Lesslie Newbigin and David J. Hesselgrave both were pivotal in critiquing foreign missions for their imposition of Western leadership styles and practices that often overlooked indigenous contexts. Newbigin defines contextualization as making the Gospel at home in a new cultural setting, ensuring it is both understandable and relevant while preserving its core truths. He mentioned in his book, "Foolishness to the Greeks", "The value of the word contextualization is that it suggests the placing of the gospel in the total context of a culture at a particular moment, a moment that is shaped by the past and looks to the future." This definition emphasizes the dynamic nature of culture, considering its historical roots and future trajectory.

The study of D. Hesselgrave is another milestone of contextualization theory in the 20th century. Hesselgrave defines contextualization as "the process of making the Christian message and church life come alive in forms appropriate to the context of the target group without compromising the essential truths of the gospel."³ This foundational definition emphasizes both cultural sensitivity and biblical fidelity in cross-cultural ministry.

In fact, there are numerous research works on the theory of contextualization in Christian mission. It is undeniable that the studies of contextualization have significantly contributed to the global mission in the 20th century. However, the world has undergone rapid transformation due to technological advancements and profound geopolitical and economic shifts in the 21st century, which has also impacted the global Christian mission environment.

GLOBAL MISSION IN FLUX: CULTURAL TRANSFORMATIONS OF THE 21ST CENTURY

Today's mission environment bears little resemblance to the world in which contextualization theory first developed. There are two major factors of world transformation in the 21st century: globalization and digitalization. Basically both of these two factors are based on the development of technology.

Globalization

Globalization refers to the process of enhancing interdependence and integration among economies, markets, societies, and cultures globally, driven by technological advancements in transportation, communication, and trade. In the context of missiology, globalization presents a double-edged sword. While it facilitates the rapid dissemination of the gospel across the world, it also engenders distinct mission challenges due to the accelerated synthesis of cultures through the influx of diverse populations into urban centers. Consequently, it has become commonplace for individuals in Berlin to enjoy Japanese ramen or Turkish chicken wraps for lunch while simultaneously listening to BTS Korean-pop music on their iPhones (American). In fact, globalization is the primary factor that renders contextualization theory obsolete in the 21st century, as there is no "core or main cultural context" in globalization to contextualize in the gospel message. Social networking sites (SNS) such as Instagram or Snapchat have become global cultural melting pots for the Millennial and Zoomer generations.

1. Guirguis, Youssry, History of Contextualization, *Journal of Adventist Mission Studies*, Vol. 15 [2019], No. 2, Art. 11: Pp. 5

2. Hiebert, Paul G. "Critical Contextualization." *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* Vol. 11, No. 3, 1987, 104–112.

3. Hesselgrave 1989, 43

Another notable aspect of globalization is the shift in the primary driving force behind Christian missionary activities from the West to the Global South, particularly in Africa, Asia, and Latin America, where there has been rapid growth. This phenomenon is evident in works such as “*Global Missiology for the 21st Century: The Iguassu Dialogue*,” edited by William D. Taylor, which emerged from the 1999 Iguassu Missiological Consultation.⁴ This book discusses the increasing dialogue between Western and non-Western Christians in a globalized context. The Western perspective of missiology is no longer the mainstream in the Christian mission field of the 21st century, and contextualization is no longer the prevailing approach today either.

Digitalization

The pace of technological advancement since the end of the 20th century has accelerated exponentially. For instance, the dial phone, which had been used for several decades, was replaced by the first Motorola cellular phone in 1973. Within two decades, the first smartphone was invented by Nokia, and the iPhone was introduced in 2007, marking the beginning of the true digitalization of people’s lives. Today, smartphones have become an integral part of every individual’s life, and the MZ generation is characterized as the “embedded digital generation” within the smartphone network.

The advent of smartphones has not only revolutionized individuals’ lives but has also significantly altered their mentalities and cultural perspectives. The digitalization facilitated by smartphones has enabled the rapid and synchronous exchange of cultural, social, and geopolitical viewpoints across the globe.

The advent of digitalization has accelerated cultural transformation, rendering contextualization obsolete in the 21st century. If digitalization assimilates individuals’ cultural and ethnic perspectives, AI homogenizes people’s consciousness and cognitive behavior through the homogenized AI data. In the digital era, humanity was the user, but in the AI era, humanity becomes an integral part of AI data. While globalization through social networks has assimilated global culture, AI synchronizes individuals’ consciousness and social norms for homogenized cognitive behavior. Consequently, in this AI-driven digital world, there is no longer any time or space for contextualization in Christian mission.

In the 21st century, in fact, Christian mission and contextualization theory face numerous challenges stemming from various cultural, social, and geopolitical factors. These include political correctness, diversity-equality-inclusiveness (DEI), queer theology, and more. Additionally, contextualization theory itself encounters challenges during theological and social

upheavals in the 21st century.⁵ However, the two most significant factors driving cultural revolution in the 21st century – globalization and digitalization – highlight the urgent need for a new methodology in Christian mission that either replaces or addresses the limitations of outdated contextualization theory in this article.

BEYOND TRADITION: MISSIOLOGICAL STRATEGIES FOR A NEW CENTURY

In his book titled *God’s Radical Love in Missio Dei*, the author presents “the Radical Cultural Synthesization for the Gospel” as an alternative approach to contextualization for a missiological strategy in the 21st century.⁶ The text defines this concept as:

1. The radical cultural synthesization for the gospel is a process of transformation of humanity in a target area of missio Dei by injecting the gospel through a common ground of the cross-cultural environment, until the Christ-centered culture and life become the dominant ones through the witness of Christians living in Gods Radical Love.
2. The radical cultural synthesization for the gospel takes Gods Word as the absolute criterion of all human culture and life, and synthesizes them to Gods Word, which is “cosmos” and “ultimate reality.” Therefore, there will be no possibility of modification of the gospel in this process.
3. The radical cultural synthesization for the gospel takes culture as a “precarious reality.” The gospel should be the backbone of such a “precarious reality,” because the gospel is the ultimate reality.
4. The radical cultural synthesization for the gospel should be carried out through Christians *kerygma*, *koinonia*, and *diakonia*, which are missional actions. These actions are rooted in a life witnessing Gods Radical Love.
5. The radical cultural synthesization for the gospel transforms the gospel information from a thin level of culture to a thick level.
6. The author believes that the radical cultural synthesization for the gospel can be processed through externalization, objectivities, and then internalization, until it forms a *nomos* with Jesus as its core.

Throughout history, cultural synthesization has been a recurring phenomenon. Typically, dominant and superior cultures have exerted influence over subordinate cultures. The most notable example of cultural synthesization in history is Hellenization, which Puchala’s book employed as a metaphor for the cultural ideological expansion and assimilation of the

4. William D. Taylor, ed. *Global Missiology for the 21st Century: The Iguassu Dialogue*. (Grand Rapids, MI: BakerAcademic, 2000).

5. See Edward Kim, *God’s Radical Love in Missio Dei: Focused on Missiology for Jewish Mission* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2024), 145-147.

6. Ibid, 150.

Western world.⁷ As outlined in historical works such as Peter Green's *Alexander to Actium: The Historical Evolution of the Hellenistic Age*, Hellenization typically involved the dissemination of Greek language, culture, and institutions across the Mediterranean and Near East following Alexander's conquests.⁸ In the context of Puchala's discussion of the Cold War, it appears probable that he utilizes Hellenization as a metaphor for the cultural and ideological expansionism of the superpowers. The Cold War witnessed both the United States and the Soviet Union promoting their political systems—capitalism and communism, respectively—through cultural exports, media, and educational programs, similar to how Greek culture was adopted in diverse regions during the Hellenistic period.

Recognizing that human culture is akin to water, fluid and ever-changing, it is impossible for any human culture to dominate over the Word of God because the Word of God stands as absolute reality, transcending human cultures. It is supra, counter, and cross-cultural, consistently dominating human cultures when the gospel is introduced in a human culture.

Consequently, it is imperative to revise the mission strategy to supplant the antiquated contextualization theology. To construct a novel mission strategy in the context of the rapidly globalizing AI era, the author has selected several key components of cultural synthesization. Primarily, these components of a contemporary mission strategy for the 21st century are meticulously expounded upon within the author's book, except for the issue of AI, because AI was not fully functional at the time I finished the book.⁹

1. *Missio Dei*
2. Cultural common ground
3. Theory of thin and thick culture
4. The super, transcendent, counter and cross-cultural attribute of the gospel.
5. Globalization
6. Peter Berger's society-making theory
7. AI generation

The fundamental foundation of the Radical Cultural Synthesization is a missiological interpretation of John 3:16 that is rooted in the concept of the Radical Love of God.¹⁰ The term *missio Dei* was coined by Karl Hartenstein during the International Missionary Council's (IMC) conference in Willingen, Germany, in 1952.¹¹ The concept of *missio Dei* represents a

7. Donald J. Puchala, *Theory and History in International Relations* (New York: Routledge, 2003) 147.

8. Peter Green, *Alexander to Actium: The Historical Evolution of the Hellenistic Age*. 1990.

9. Edward Kim, *God's Radical Love in Missio Dei: Focused on Missiology for Jewish Mission*. (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2024) 151-169.

10. The Radical Love of God is capitalized because the love of God is radical and the sole love in the universe. See, Kim, 2024:67-71

11. Karl Hartenstein, *Theologische Besinnung*, in: Walter Freytag (ed.), *Mission zwischen Gestern und Morgen: Vom*

paradigm shift from the traditional understanding of mission as the exclusive domain of the Church to the proposition that mission is an inherent activity or attribute of God. G. Vicedom elucidated that the *missio Dei* commenced with the act of "sending."¹² God initiated mission through the figures of Adam, Noah, Abraham, Jacob, and Israel. Subsequently, God manifested Himself through the incarnation of Jesus. Vicedom defined the goal of *missio Dei* as the kingdom of God. According to the theology of *missio Dei*, the subject of mission is God. God created the universe and humanity. And the humanity was created in God's image and likeness (Gen. 1:26).

The author elucidated that the fundamental motivation of the mission of God is the radical love of God, which is rooted in the concepts of "*Hesed*," "*Racham*," and "*Emeth*" in Hebrew. This radical love of God serves as the cornerstone of the mission of God.¹³ Therefore, the mission is not ours, but God's mission stemmed and motivated from His *Hesed*, *Racham* and *Emeth*, until He gave His begotten Son, Jesus for the salvation of all humanity (John. 3:16).

Subsequently, the "cultural common ground" serves as the catalyst for the dissemination of the gospel. All humans share commonalities within their cultures. Donald Brown elucidated these universal human characteristics in his book titled *Human Universals*, published in 1991. These commonalities originate from the inherent similarities among human beings: biological necessities and habits, psychological similarities, shared spiritual attributes or social activities, and so forth. Although there may be cultural and cognitive differences between cultures and societies, human life remains remarkably consistent across diverse environments. Consequently, this "cultural common ground" presents an ideal opportunity for establishing a cross-cultural connection and delivering the gospel message. In 2024, I organized an International English Youth Bible camp in Germany that attracted over 70 teenagers from five different countries. They were immediately connected through English language and Instagram. Many of them had limited English proficiency, but the Google translation app proved to be an invaluable tool for their communication. This experience provided the MZ generation with a new "digitized common cultural ground."

Upon assuming the presidency of the United States in 2016, Donald Trump garnered limited support from the younger generation due to their limited knowledge of him. However, during the 2024 presidential election, Trump actively participated in numerous

Gestaltwandel der Weltmission der Christenheit im Licht der Konferenz des Internationalen Missionsrats in Willingen, (Stuttgart: Evangelischer Missionsverlag, 1952), 51-72. See also, Hartenstein, Karl, *Wozu nötigt die Finanzlage der Mission?: Evangelisches Missionsmagazin*, (Neue Folge 78, 1934) 217-229.

12. Georg F. Vicedom, *The Mission of God: An Introduction to a Theology of Mission*, trans. Gilbert A. Thiele and Dennis Hilgendorf (Saint Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House, 1965), 5-12.

13. Edward Kim, 2024, 32-71.

podcasts and heavily utilized social media platforms to target the Millennial-Zoomer (MZ) generation. This generation experienced a significant shift in their perception of Trump, leading to a majority of them becoming his supporters. In the field of anthropology, this phenomenon is referred to as a cognition shift from a thin perception to a thick perception. This concept is extensively discussed in "The Interpretation of Cultures" (pages 6-10) by Clifford Geertz, who introduces and develops the analytical approaches of "thick description" and "thin description." These terms were borrowed from philosopher Gilbert Ryle but were specifically applied to ethnographic and anthropological research by Geertz.¹⁴ According to Geertz, a thin description provides a basic, factual account of an event, capturing its surface-level actions without any interpretation of their significance.¹⁵ For instance, a thin description of a person rapidly contracting their right eyelid might simply state, "The person's right eyelid contracted." While this description captures the physical act, it lacks insight into the underlying reasons for it.

In contrast, a thick description delves beyond the surface to uncover the layers of meaning and context that lend significance to the behavior. It involves interpreting the symbols, motives, and cultural codes embedded within the action. In the context of the 2024 election, Donald Trump effectively mobilized the "MZ generations" who hold a thin perception of him by rapidly connecting them through social networks that are prevalent among these generations. In the process of cultural synthesization, there is a significant shift in cultural cognition and perception from a thin level to a thick level. This transformation culminates in the emergence of a novel social norm.

Peter Berger's seminal work, "Sacred Canopy," published in 1966, offers a comprehensive analysis of the cultural cognitive level of individuals transitioning from a "thin culture" to a "thick culture." Entitled *The Sacred Canopy*, this work delves into the concept of "sociology of knowledge" and elucidates how society shapes human behavior and how religion influences the process of world construction. Berger posits that a radical cultural synthesization for the gospel can be achieved through his theory of world construction. According to Berger, humanity is inherently incomplete and undergoes a process of development and completion within a society. The process of creating society is also part of this development. He referred to this process as the "dialectic process of world building," which comprises "externalization, objectivation, and internalization."¹⁶

Consequently, the introduction of a new culture commences at the surface of the existing local culture. When the gospel encounters a new people group or

cultural community, it directly confronts them and seeks common ground to establish initial contact. Subsequently, the gospel can be introduced into a new people group through shared cultural elements, such as digitalized gospel disseminators (e.g., social media platforms, AI prompts). Initially, the gospel remains at a superficial level of cultural understanding within the people group, but gradually it becomes externalized, objective, and eventually internalized within their cultural perceptions. However, all of this process should be undertaken with the Radical Love of God, as the Radical Love is the fundamental motivation of God's mission and the everlasting fuel for progressing *missio Dei*.

The theory of radical cultural synthesization necessitates further research and extensive discourse involving a diverse range of individuals from various cultural backgrounds, as it is still in its early stages of development. Nevertheless, cultural synthesization has already been demonstrated in our adversaries, such as the LGBT community, leftist propaganda, the secularization movement, liberal theologians, and even politics brainwashing MZs. The Enemy of God has been employing cultural synthesization for an extended period.¹⁷ Prior to the advent of globalization and digitalization, the social construction operation was a gradual process. However, in the contemporary era, cultures and societies undergo rapid transformations, making it challenging to contextualize the gospel for a culture that can only sustain a few seconds. The only viable approach to fulfilling the mission of God is to disseminate the gospel, as it possesses inherent supernity, transcendence, cross-cultural nature, and superiority over all human cultures.

17. Homosexuality has been a kind of mental illness until 1974. But, it became a social norm in the 21st century. This is an example of cultural synthesization by our enemies.



Edward Kim
beityeshua@me.com

Dr. Edward Kim, is a missionary with World Partner for over two decades serving in Jewish missions, primarily in the USA and among Ukrainian refugees in Europe. From 1991 to 2008, Dr. Kim served in the Jewish mission with Campus Crusade. In 2009, the World Partner organization recruited and commissioned Dr. Kim as a missionary. Dr. Kim's educational journey encompasses completion of a Master's program in Biblical Archaeology at Tel Aviv University in 1998. In 1999, Dr. Kim enrolled at Fuller Theological Seminary and graduated with a Master's degree in Intercultural Studies in 2002. Dr. Kim earned his Ph.D. in Missiology at Concordia Theological Seminary. Currently, he serves as the founder and chairman of Messianic Bible Institute in Brandenburg, Germany..

14. Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays*. Basic Books, 1973.

15. Ibid, 6-10

16. Peter L. Berger, *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1967), 4.

Sex Trafficking and Slavery in the Christian Church: A Call to Repentance and New Life in Christ

James D. Langteau, Timothy D. Dunham, and Kenneth D. Gossett

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this qualitative case study article is not to condemn but to exhort Christians, churches, denominations, and Bible colleges – all of which are called by God in Scripture to equip other Christians as Disciples in spiritual growth. Many professing Christians, however, are living lives of contradiction and silent enslavement. Cognitive dissonance is rampant, with many claiming to be delivered and empowered by the Lord yet living dysfunctional lives of habitual bondage. Instead of embodying dynamic new life, they remain carnal and powerless. This dilemma is either the result of unbelief or the lack of discipleship. Sexual sins are often not just a problem but also symptoms of even more serious underlying problems of unbelief. Only when believers are empowered would they be unfettered servant leaders who guard their hearts and are fully devoted to Christ without bondage to sexual immorality.

Key Words: sex addiction, slavery, porn, pornography, sin, deliverance.

INTRODUCTION

The authors previously researched and wrote the article, *Sex Trafficking and Slavery in Southeast Asia: To Free Captives* (Langteau & Dunham, 2021). The article was published during 2021 in the peer-reviewed journal, *The Journal for Statesmanship and Public Policy* (see <https://digitalcommons.liberty.edu/jspp/vol2/iss1/4/>). Since then, the publisher reported that the article was downloaded thousands of times in over 90 countries. The article was also re-printed by permission in two other journals, the *Asian Missions Advance* and the *Journal of Biblical Missiology*. This previous article generated much interest and rightly so; the topic is immediate, urgent, and disturbing. This previous article contextualized a review of sex trafficking in Southeast Asia and the impact worldwide, conveyed a presentation of the findings and implications, and it provided recommendations for proactively addressing sex trafficking in our societies. Specific attention was given to the gap in the available literature pertaining to the process and dynamics of psychological coercion within a given culture as it relates to people involved in human sex trafficking. Many cultural and psychological ramifications were noted which create complexities when seeking to effectively make a difference. Much can and should be done about the regional and global issue of sex trafficking and

slavery.

Now, however, the authors recognize the need to also address the issue much closer to home. We do not need to look into global, regional or national issues of sex trafficking and slavery before it is apparent that many in our own communities and often our own homes are in bondage to sexual addictions and sexual immorality. The victims of this slavery are less apparent, for they are not physically constrained or forced, though the bondage and the consequences are often equally devastating. Failed relationships and marriages are frequently traced back to the introduction of pornography that resulted in alienated relationships, often escalated to physical sexual impropriety, leading to ever-increasing aberrant behavior and, ultimately, either the dissolution of marriages or the maintenance of dysfunctional relationships. Almost invariably, relationships are so strained that dysfunction becomes the norm. It is not uncommon for individuals involved in sexual sins to even lose their careers, income, and homes. Tragically, many of these people are actually unaware that they are in bondage of any kind. When deception and bondage are most effective, the victim is deceived into thinking their lifestyle is normal and their souls are healthy.

If one were to scan the globe in order to evaluate the health of the Christian Church, there would no doubt be many good reasons to celebrate, as the Gospel is clearly being proclaimed by many local expressions of the Body of Christ across a number of diverse Christian denominations. A closer look, however, would also reveal that denominations, churches, local groups of believers, families, and more than a few individuals who call themselves by the name of Christ Jesus are not doing well. A good deal of dysfunction exists at both an organizational and individual level.

Perhaps dysfunction is not surprising since those who call themselves Christians are just people, fallen creatures who have presumably been redeemed by the blood of Jesus. Nevertheless, it would be biblically correct to expect that those who profess to have met and to know the risen Savior would themselves be transformed into new creations (see 2 Corinthians 5:17). Christians must represent the name of Jesus well and set the example that Christ has commanded and empowered us to set (see 2 Corinthians 5:17).

PROBLEM

God created sex, God defined it, and God blessed it within the context of marriage between a man and a woman. The Bible declares that God intentionally

created male and female and established that a male and a female were to be joined together in marriage (see Genesis 1:27; Matthew 19:4-6; Mark 10:6; & Hebrews 13:4). What God designed as beautiful and holy, the enemy distorts to dishonor and enslave people. People's hearts then become hardened by the deceitfulness of sin (see 2 Corinthians 4:4; & Hebrews 3:13).

The Internet has fueled an alarming increase in the number of people viewing pornography and entangled in sexual addiction. Before the Internet, purchasing pornography was much more public and involved interactions with a real person while under the gaze of others standing in line to make their purchases. Now one enters the vast world of porn in complete privacy with the simple click of a keyboard button. This ease of access has taken the porn industry to a whole new level, and with it has swept millions of men and women into its web. The numbers are staggering. In 2014 the anti-porn group "Proven Men" along with the Barna group surveyed 1,000 American men. The findings revealed that 97% of the men had viewed pornography, 78% viewed porn before turning 16 years old, 77% of those ages 18-30 view porn at least monthly, 65% viewed porn at work in the last 90 days, and 64% of men view porn at least once a month. What is most concerning is that this problem of pornography is not limited to those outside the church. The survey confirmed that those who claim to be Christians view porn at the same rate as those who do not claim any Christian affiliation. The Proven Men survey found that "Approximately two-thirds (64%) of U.S. men view pornography at least monthly. The number of Christian men viewing pornography virtually mirrors the national average." (see <https://www.provenmen.org/2014PornSurvey/>).

In 2019, the Freedom Fight (see <https://thefreedomfight.org/>) conducted a survey of more than 1,300 practicing Christian college students from over thirty different campuses across the country. These students were not just casual Christians but those described as being "involved in a campus ministry, and they considered their faith in Christ to be very important to them. Many of them were leaders in their ministries." But even among these Christian leaders and serious Christians, 89% watch porn at least occasionally and 61% viewed porn at least weekly. Fully 51% of these people said they were addicted to porn (see <https://www.relevantmagazine.com/life5/relationships/porn-is-rewiring-a-whole-generation-christians-included/>).

PURPOSE

The purpose of this article is to challenge and encourage local church and Christian servant leadership to:

1. Have and apply a sound understanding of God's call in Scripture to a restored relationship with

Him and others, which is also demonstrated in sexual morality;

2. Have a clear vision for the vital role of the local church in intentionally discipling Christians to be equipped and prepared for life and ministry; and,
3. To both apply this for their own lives and to encourage others they interact with.

In our lives, we should not grumble and complain about all the problems in modern Christian families and in individuals who claim to follow Christ. Rather, it is important to take a serious look at the problems that exist and to examine realistic solutions. What are the problems and issues that are widely evident in the lives of Christians and in Christian churches relating to sexuality today? What might be some of the root causes underlying these issues? More significantly, what can be done to help Christians be strong, healthy, and liberated from the bondage of sexual immorality?

The intention of this article is not to condemn or reject, but to encourage, and to promote restoration and empowerment. Bad news is rampant in our world today, but if we are willing to face it and address it, there is also the promise of Good News.

RESEARCH QUESTION

The research question for this qualitative case study was: What strategies can be used to address problems in the use of pornography or with sexual addiction of some type?

THE SYMPTOMS

In one of Jesus' many encounters with the Pharisees, he made the point that healthy people do not go to the doctor, for it is sick people who seek a physician's help (see Mark 2:17). If modern Christians, their families, and their churches are in a state of relative health and vitality, then there is no reason to seek the great physician for help and healing. If, however, we take an honest assessment of those who claim to be Christians, what do we find? Is the patient healthy, or are there symptoms that would indicate the need for a doctor? A quick survey can reveal a number of symptoms that are prevalent among those who claim Christ's name which indicate the need for attention.

1. Is there someone in your family who spends an inordinate amount of time on the internet alone in their room?
2. Do they get angry with other family members if their privacy is interrupted?
3. Do they display negative emotional responses if their behavior is questioned?
4. Do they encourage others to have access to their electronic devices to see what they are viewing, or does it seem more like they are hiding something?
5. Would they rather be alone than join together in

family activities?

6. Are there any other issues that concern you about this family member's activities or failure to accomplish things that they should be mastering?
7. Is there a problem here that needs to be discussed and explored in more depth with a mentor that could be helpful in dealing with these issues?

THE IMMEDIATE CONSEQUENCES

Pornography is clearly a powerful temptation that seems all but impossible to resist, though 1 Corinthians 10:13 promises that God is faithful to provide a way to resist all temptations. Some may say that in the end it is really not such a big deal; pornography is just pictures and images. Some have argued that God created many beautiful things to look at and enjoy, so porn is just people enjoying beauty. A list of at least some of the many reasons why pornography and sexual addictions are problems should be considered. For many, the main problem with getting caught, is that it is embarrassing. The embarrassment of getting caught and publicly exposed brings shame if you are a pastor, in ministry in your church, if you claim to be a Christian, or are a church member. Yet there is a much greater danger in porn than merely damaging one's reputation. Pornography is not honoring to God, to our wives (if we are married), to our future spouses if unmarried, to our mothers, to our sisters, to our sons and daughters, to our sisters in Christ, or to women in general. Porn is dishonoring to women because porn takes the wonder and beauty of a woman and the wonderful gift of sexual intimacy as a way to build the deepest connection and expression of love and affection, and turns it into something cheap, uncaring, and devoid of the quality of a meaningful relationship. The use of porn turns people into things and toys for one's own self-gratification. Porn is using another person for one's own selfish gain. Porn diminishes the honorable place and role of women and instead relegates them to merely objects for selfish pleasure without the committed relationship of mutual care and concern. One may argue that viewing porn does not reduce them to seeing all women that way, but evidence reveals that the experience of viewing porn changes the way men look at and see women. Research supports this reality. "With regard to the effects of partner use, Zillmann and Bryant (1988) found that viewing pornography led to decreased satisfaction in one's partner, increased callousness toward females, distorted perceptions of sexuality, and decreased values related to monogamy and marriage. Research also has shown that viewing pornography increases one's judgment of non-monogamous relationships as normal behavior" (Drake, 1994). (see <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC5370376/>)

Further, pornography contributes to human trafficking, and victimizing women and even children. Many, but not all, of those creating pornographic

content do so of their own choice and free will. But porn, by its very illicit nature is constantly pushing the envelope for more deviant sexual behavior. Consequently, there is a growing market for sexual content that is illegal. Children are specifically at risk for being coerced or forced to perform for the camera. The National Strategy for Child Exploitation Prevention and Interdiction, a 2010 report to Congress, concluded that, "offenders have been able to master Internet technologies to better mask their identities." The report focuses on interviews and research covering child exploitation problems over a 12-month period by the National Drug Intelligence Center (NDIC). The NDIC's research determined that there have been "dramatic increases in the number, and violent character, of the sexually abusive images of children being trafficked through the Internet" and that there is a "disturbing trend of younger children depicted in these images, even including toddlers and infants." (see <https://www.thorn.org/blog/child-sex-trafficking-child-pornography-aided-internet-anonymity/>)

Since viewing porn and sexual addictions results in attitudes that fail to honor women and can lead to the trafficking of women and children, it must be said that viewing porn is neither loving God, nor your neighbor as yourself. Porn is a serious sin that is ultimately treating others in a way that is unloving. The Bible is clear that the failure to love others is no small matter, "We know that we have passed out of death into life, because we love the brothers. Whoever does not love abides in death" (ESV Bible, 2001, 1 John 3:14).

Finally, all sexual immorality is a sin against our own body. Flee from sexual immorality. "Every other sin a person commits is outside the body, but the sexually immoral person sins against his own body" (ESV Bible, 2001, 1 Corinthians 6:18). We do damage to our body and to our own life when we allow the cancer of lust and sexual impurity in any form to take root in our lives. Sexual immorality is a spiritual assault on our own body, and there are significant consequences to all sins when the wages of sin is death (see Romans 6:23). An increasing body of research reveals that widespread and frequent use of pornography is making it difficult for men to have sexual encounters with a real woman. "Porn's rewiring of the brain is behind the phenomenon of Porn Induced Erectile Dysfunction (PIED) among young men and teenagers." A 2016 TIME magazine article shared the stories of several twentysomethings suffering from PIED. The authors of this article reported that before internet porn, only five percent of men under forty had erectile dysfunction. Today, 33 percent of men under forty report some degree of ED. Surprisingly, this is an issue we are increasingly seeing among teenagers. A 2016 study of Canadian adolescents showed that 45.3 percent admitted to problems with erectile dysfunction. (see <https://www.relevantmagazine.com/life5/relationships/porn-is-rewiring-a-whole-generation-christians->

included/) (<https://time.com/magazine/us/4277492/april-11th-2016-vol-187-no-13-u-s/>)

THE ETERNAL CONSEQUENCES

Pornography is idolatry. Christians are people who claim to love the Lord God with all their hearts and souls, but pornography is a false idol that usurps God. A Christian may claim with his lips that Jesus is Lord, but he who seeks pornography reveals that something else actually has first place in his heart. Do we seek first the Kingdom of God (see Matthew 6:33), or have we been deceived into seeking instead after what tantalizes the flesh? Could the King of Kings overlook such treason and betrayal?

Pornography is also unbelief. Hebrews 11:6 declares, "And without faith it is impossible to please Him, for whoever would draw near to God must believe that He exists and that He rewards those who seek Him." Clearly, this passage reveals that if one had faith, one would please him and draw near to God, and in the process obey Him. If a person chooses instead to seek a false sense of fulfillment through pornography, he is revealing a lack of faith. You cannot claim to trust God to look out for your best interest yet seek to gratify yourself apart from him at the same time. That is in fact the opposite of faith. God has declared that without faith it is impossible to please Him. Not only that, but those who do such things shall not inherit the Kingdom of God. The Bible declares in part, "Now the works of the flesh are evident: sexual immorality. I warn you, as I warned you before, that those who do such things will not inherit the Kingdom of God" (English Standard Version Bible, 2001, Galatians 5:19-21).

"For this is the will of God, your sanctification: that you abstain from sexual immorality; that each one of you know how to control his own body in holiness and honor, not in the passion of lust like the Gentiles who do not know God; that no one transgresses and wrongs his brother in this matter, because the Lord is an avenger in all these things, as we told you beforehand and solemnly warned you. For God has not called us for impurity, but in holiness. Therefore, whoever disregards this, disregards not man but God, who gives his Holy Spirit to you" (ESV Bible, 2001, 1 Thessalonians 4:3-8).

WAR AGAINST THE SOUL

For any Christian who takes the Bible seriously, the most significant factor that warns against getting tangled up with pornography is that it is an abomination to God. "Let us walk properly as in the daytime, not in orgies and drunkenness, not in sexual immorality and sensuality, not in quarreling and jealousy" (ESV Bible, 2001, Romans 13:13).

The serious implication of sexual immorality, which includes pornography, stands in conflicting contrast with God's word. "But now I am writing to you

not to associate with anyone who bears the name of brother if he is guilty of sexual immorality or greed, or is an idolater, reviler, drunkard, or swindler — not even to eat with such a one" (ESV Bible, 2001, 1 Corinthians 5:11). Also, Scripture commands, "do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: neither the sexually immoral, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor men who practice homosexuality" (ESV Bible, 2001, 1 Corinthians 6:9). To the Ephesians Paul warns "But sexual immorality and all impurity or covetousness must not even be named among you, as is proper among saints" (ESV Bible, 2001, Ephesians 5:3). Lest we think this is only a concern of Paul, the author to the Hebrews writes "Let marriage be held in honor among all, and let the marriage bed be undefiled, for God will judge the sexually immoral and adulterous" (ESV Bible, 2001, Hebrews 13:4).

If this assessment is not bad enough it does get worse. For some men and women, it does not end with simply viewing porn. For some, it opens the door to a dark and deeply perverted world where people seek real life encounters to fulfill every kind of sexual fantasy, often involving children. Since there is a market for it, children are being trafficked into this horrible industry and professing Christians are not immune even from this. All too often the news reports some pastor or church leader who is convicted of sexual abuse of a child or youth. One account from a recent headline involved a man we will call "Participant 1" who was arrested for sexually assaulting several under-aged girls. One victim alleged that she had been sexually abused by Participant 1 since the age of 11 when they met over social media. She reported that he would provide money, drugs and other gifts in exchange for sex. The abuse went on for over 4 years. The sexual activity would take place at his home and he would often record the sexual assaults on video. (see https://dailyinterlake.com/news/2022/jan/06/columbia-falls-man-accused-child-sex-abuse/?fbclid=IwAR3865Jo1eMGGGK4wU-AT9miILO4W5iFxD1Dv_rMS1a8NQpZ27bhf5D8sKE).

Participant 2 shared a very dysfunctional story. He had an experience with Christ as a teen and went to Bible College. He served at his local church and at youth camps. Eventually, he served as a church youth pastor. His faith in Christ and his desire to see youth reached with the gospel seemed genuine. It did not appear at the time that his motive for ministry was to sexually abuse young people. He was married with young children and appeared to have a sincere heart to follow Christ. At the same time, it was discovered he was already viewing porn. Participant 2 then revealed that he had been sexually assaulted as a child and he was struggling with the wounds from those experiences. Thirty years later, he had gone so far down a road of sexual perversion and bondage that he committed unthinkable acts toward innocent children with a blatant intention that is mind boggling for one

who claimed to know Christ (Personal Conversation, 2020). What began as occasionally viewing porn turned into an addiction to porn which eventually led to physically abusing children. If left unchecked, this is a genuine risk for anyone who opens their heart and mind to pornography.

COMMONLY SUGGESTED CAUSES

How can so many professing Christians be struggling with such a horrible sin and one that the Bible speaks so strongly against? Some might argue that both access to and acceptance of porn have put this temptation before people in a new way that is so powerful it is impossible to resist. This argument does not consider the situation in the Roman Empire at the time of the early church. Temple prostitution was widespread and, while the internet did not exist, it is naive to assume that sexual addictions and temptations were any less rampant or pervasive as the sexual temptations of the modern world. At the Jerusalem counsel recorded in Acts chapter 15, Gentile converts were expected to abstain from sexual immorality (see Acts 15:20,21). The New Testament presents the view that any disciple of Christ can and should experience freedom and deliverance from bondage to any sin, including sexual addictions (see Romans 6:6; 1 Thessalonians 4:3; 1 Corinthians 6:13; 1 Corinthians 10:13; & Ephesians 5:3).

Perhaps the problem is that we are merely broken people and it is to be expected that this kind of struggle and defeat is just a normal part of the Christian life. Wasn't it this very kind of person that Jesus spent most of His time with, that is, prostitutes and sinners? It is true that Jesus came to help the sick, the broken, and the unrighteous. In His grace He does accept me "just as I am," but it is a defective and false theology that teaches people are to remain broken until arriving in Heaven. Jesus came to save broken and sinful people, and His grace is sufficient no matter how much we sin and struggle with temptation. Yet it is God's plan and purpose, not only to forgive our sin, but also to heal our brokenness. Scripture is clear that salvation also involves the transformation of our broken and sinful lives into a people who are conformed to the image of his Son (see Romans 8:29). This means that the character and conduct of a Christ follower needs to be transformed to the standard of Jesus's character and conduct.

Our study also included findings from Participant 3, who voiced the presumption that sexual immorality is caused by poverty, negative influences, pornographic films, internet sites, excessive use of alcohol, and the use of marijuana or other drugs. These claimed causes, however, are themselves just symptoms. Further, in contrast, there are many examples of those who lived in poverty among negative influences who nevertheless avoided bondage to sexual immorality (International Journal of Innovative Social Sciences & Humanities Research 8(2):37-44, April-June, 2020

© SEAHI PUBLICATIONS, 2020 (see www.seahipaj.org ISSN: 2354-2926). This participant loved telling his story about the background problems in his family growing up and how they influenced him in the wrong way. Yet when he was asked what the flaws were behind his story and what the underlying causes were to these symptoms, he admitted he never considered deeper implications and had no understanding of his own contribution or volition.

Perhaps the problem is that some pastors and seminaries are not giving church leaders the counseling tools and resources to deal with these kinds of issues. Sadly, though, the church's increased dependence on psychology has not reduced the spread of sexual addictions among members. Instead, the problem has exploded over the past 15 years despite an increasing number of churches offering counseling services and addictions support. While there are undoubtedly benefits of counseling and tools that psychology offers that are of some help, in the end our hope for life transformation cannot be found in a better counseling model. The popular idea that the real solution to the problem is found in modern psychology and not in the Bible is in fact part of the problem. The Bible teaches clearly that we have access to an incredible power to overcome temptation and defeat sin. This power is available to every follower of Christ (see 1 Corinthians 10:13; Luke 22:40,46; & 1 John 5:4-5). What is need most are not better counseling techniques from the world of psychology but better teaching about the powerful provisions God has made available through a dynamic relationship with Him to overcome every sin, and which empowers a person to live a life that is pure and blameless before Him and before the world! Both strategies in tandem can work in bringing about desired changes in this world.

UNDERLYING REASONS THAT CAUSE SYMPTOMS

So then, how is it that many professing Christians today are no different than lost people when it comes to viewing porn and being held in the grip of sexual addictions? Cognitive dissonance is evident, with many claiming one thing yet living in opposition to their own stated convictions.

A lack of true conversion. One answer that must be considered and taken to heart is that many of those claiming to be Christians are not. Jesus declared that many would claim to believe but be exposed as pretenders: "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. On that day many will say to me, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many mighty works in your name?' And then will I declare to them, 'I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness'" (ESV Bible, 2001, Matthew 7:21-23). Even those in positions

of Christian leadership and pastoring churches should take a serious look at the true state of their soul, if they are living under the bondage of sexual addictions. "For you may be sure of this, that everyone who is sexually immoral or impure, or who is covetous (that is, an idolater), has no inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and God. Let no one deceive you with empty words, for because of these things the wrath of God comes upon the sons of disobedience" (ESV Bible, 2001, Ephesians 5:5-6).

Those who show no fruit of repentance have reason to doubt their true salvation. Salvation is not merely the forgiveness of sins, but a work of God that makes us new persons in Christ (see 2 Corinthians 5:17). The power of sin should no longer have dominion over the lives of those who have truly been "saved." Does this mean anyone who views porn cannot be a Christian? No! Certainly, the process of sanctification is just that, a process and not an instant and complete change in the life and conduct of the believer. Struggling with sexual temptations, and occasional moral lapses into sin, are not proof that we are lost and without Christ. Nonetheless, at the very least it is a mark of significant immaturity and hypocrisy. At worst, if it is chronic or habitual, it may be a sign that one has never experienced the regenerating work of Christ in their life (see 1 John 3:4-9). For any person caught in the trap of sexual addictions, the first step in being set free is to examine their heart and ask if they have truly been born again (see 2 Corinthians 13:5-6). This will be marked by a genuine confession and turning away from sin (see 1 John 1:9), including sexual immorality of every kind, and a life that demonstrates the fruit of repentance. If repentance and cleansing are lacking, then turning to God and seeking His saving power and grace over your life is the first essential step toward freedom.

Genuine and saving faith results in God transforming people into new creations (see 2 Corinthians 5:17). Jesus is relational and restorative, and this is a game-changer. A.W. Tozer observed that if people are not changed by grace, they are not saved by grace (Tozer, 2015). Jesus explained the parable of the Sower and the Seed in Mark 4. The seed, which is the truth of God's Word, was the same in every example, but was received quite differently on four diverse soils representing four different types of hearts. What is remarkable is that only one soil (or heart), the good soil, proved to be authentic. The seed within the good soil produced abundant fruit, in contrast to the seeds that fell on hard, rocky, or thorny soil. Though the plants that grew in rocky and thorny soil appeared alive, they produced no fruit and were ultimately cut down and burned (see Mark 4:3-20). "Now to Him who is able to keep you from stumbling, and to present you faultless before the presence of His glory with exceeding joy, to God our Savior, who alone is wise, be glory and majesty, dominion and power, both now and forever. Amen" (ESV Bible, 2001, Jude 1:24-25)

Tragically, false Christians are deceived and completely unaware they are unsaved. John MacArthur stated, "No one is harder to reach than a false Christian" (Personal conversation, 2021). In the words of C. S. Lewis "The sins of the flesh are bad, but they are the least bad of all sins. . . . For there are two things inside me, competing with the human self which I must try to overcome. They are the Animal self, and the Diabolical self. The Diabolical self is the worse of the two. That is why a cold, self-righteous prig who goes regularly to church may be far nearer to hell than a prostitute. But, of course, it is better to be neither" (Lewis, C. 1957).

A lack of life-changing discipleship. A second cause that must be considered is that we are failing in the task of making true disciples. In his book, *The Theology of Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, Godsey quoted Bonhoeffer, "Christianity without discipleship is Christianity without Christ" (Godsey J.D., 2015, p. 28). If this is a factor contributing to the rampant spread of sexual addiction in the church, then it is the church and its leaders who must take responsibility to address and remedy the problem. This is not to say churches do not already have a vision for making disciples, or have no concern to train and develop their members to walk with Christ and know Him. However, it is clear that if such a large swath of people are held captive to porn and sexual addictions, then whatever the church thinks is being done to make true Christ followers is inadequate. We are not teaching and equipping people to walk in victory and to be set free from the death grip of sin over their lives, though called by God to teach and equip members (see Ephesians 4:11-12).

Do we focus so much on making converts that we are failing to train and equip people to observe all that Jesus has commanded (see Matthew 28:18-20)? If we take discipleship seriously, we need to evaluate how effective we are in making genuine disciples. Are we equipping people to walk in genuine relationships with Christ through the supernatural power promised in Scripture to defeat the sins that bind them? At the heart of discipleship is growing people into a life of faith that results in obedience to God. This is not legalism if one's obedience flows out of personal love for God and from seeing God's great sacrifice in giving His Son to redeem us (see John 15:9-13). Genuine faith "leads to changed beliefs, changed thinking, and changed behavior and relationships. Then all things can become new" (Langteau, Blankenship, Dunham, Jun, 2021, p. 1).

The wrong measure of success. Lastly, it is possible that churches are so focused on how many views they get on their social media or how many attenders arrive on Sunday morning that they have lost sight of the high calling of seeing people radically transformed by the Gospel. At times professing Christians may value the valueless while denigrating the precious.

The Apostle Paul's various descriptions of putting off the old and putting on the new indicate that there is a strong expectation from Scripture that people will live very different lives as a result of meeting Christ (see Colossians 3:1-17; Ephesians 4:17-32; 2 Corinthians 5:17; Romans 6:6-18). The very purpose of God's salvation is that we would be conformed to the image of his Son (see Romans 8:29). These passages could be mistakenly taken as the responsibility of the individual and not the mission of the church, but no such escape is possible when we read God's call on the church. "And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ" (English Standard Version Bible, 2001, Ephesians 4:11-13). The God-given mandate for the church then is nothing less than a ministry of radical transformation from a life under the bondage of sin, to a life characterized as "the measure of the fullness of the stature of Christ." The church that is effective in seeing two lives changed into the likeness of Christ is vastly more successful than a church that preaches to thousands but sees no one changed by the message. Lives that are experiencing this kind of radical transformation will not be trapped in the chains of sexual addictions.

Often, we are busy doing what we we're not called to do and failing to obey the Lord (see Luke 6:46). Could it be that we do not actually believe what we claim to believe? We can also fear the wrong things while neglecting the needful thing. "Never fear dying, beloved. Dying is the last, but the least matter that a Christian has to be anxious about. Fear living...that is a hard battle to fight, a stern discipline to endure, a rough voyage to undergo" (Spurgeon, 1988). Sexual addiction and porn are complex issues that both Scripture and the data strongly suggest need to be addressed even in our own congregations.

CONCLUSION: HOW TO BE SET FREE

What can and must the church do to help people truly overcome sexual sin that has so captured and enslaved the professing church? What message can we offer to help people in our churches to be truly set free and walk in the righteousness that the Bible expects of the Lord's saints? The strategies that may be helpful to you and your congregation based on our research and experience with this topic are the following:

FIRST, we need to preach the Gospel of Salvation to those in the church as well as those outside the church. If the first problem is that many of those who claim to be followers of Christ are not, then the first step is to, as it were, preach to the choir. Books like, *Conversion: How God Creates a People*, by Michael Lawrence (Crossway/Good News Publishers, 2017) teach a great deal about the vital importance of setting the bar high

for those who would claim Christ as Savior. In far too many places the message of salvation is inadequate and misleading, failing to include the biblical requirement of repentance from sin (see Matthew 3:8; Luke 3:8; Acts 11:18; Romans 2:4; 2 Corinthians 7:10; & 2 Timothy 2:25). In our eagerness to see people come to Christ and be saved, we may give people a false hope that is not rooted in the work of Christ, but in their own prayers, or religious experiences. We must firmly reject a false salvation that rests on anything other than the exclusive and finished work of Christ on the cross. We need to care much more about teaching people what God declares in holy Scripture concerning genuine saving faith based on repentance and total surrender, rather than giving people a false confidence that they are saved when in fact they may not be! "Therefore encourage one another and build one another up, just as you are doing" (1 Thessalonians 5:9-11). The church environment described in the New Testament is one in which the weak are not shunned but receive instruction and encouragement, and provided discipleship with accountability.

SECOND, church leaders that rightly emphasize salvation through Christ alone, by faith alone, based on the word of God alone, may still fall short in equipping people to overcome sin. The problem here is not a deficient Gospel. A person may profess to have faith in Christ yet still lack the right teaching and understanding to overcome sin. The problem here is that some churches are proclaiming an incomplete Gospel. This message is incomplete because it only tells one part of the work of the cross - that Jesus died to forgive their sins. This is true, and it is vital that we teach the work of Christ as the means of justification -making us right with God. However, this is not the whole Gospel. The power of the cross of Jesus not only cleanses us from sin but also breaks the power of sin in our lives. That is why the Bible speaks with such force that no one who is truly saved should live in bondage to sin -whether it is sexual addiction or any other bondage. The work on the cross defeats the power of sin that would hold us captive. The book, *Every Man's Battle* illustrates how this incomplete Gospel plays out in daily life. The book's main point is that it is our battle, our duty, and our work to defeat sin, especially sexual sin. Hence the title, *Every Man's Battle*. We would contend that it is this very message that is contributing to the problem rather than solving it! The book makes the case that the cross made it possible for you to be in a relationship with God and to be forgiven of sin, but then, falsely implies that the battle over sin is now solely up to the individual. Overcoming sin then becomes a private battle one must fight on one's own. This is an incomplete Gospel and contrary to the teaching of Scripture. This error is based on a humanistic notion that people are essentially good and have the power to conquer sin. This flawed thinking also greatly misunderstands the purpose of the cross. Scripture, in contrast, teaches

that we are helpless to live a godly life on our own. In fact, our own efforts to be righteous apart from Christ are called filthy rags (see Isaiah 64:6). It is through Christ Jesus alone that we receive supernatural strength to have victory over sin (see Philippians 4:13). The Lord is faithful to give power to overcome sin (see 1 Corinthians 10:13). God is looking for the humble soul who knows how to be totally dependent on Him for everything.

A THIRD concern that we believe contributes greatly to the current bondage of so many believers, is teaching a very man-centered theology rather than a truly God-centered theology. The book, *Every Man's Battle*, is a negative illustration of this issue as well. The book claims that we will grow in our motivation to turn away from porn and sexual addiction when we cultivate a greater passion for our spouse. This is, of course, important and should be true of every godly husband. Sadly, however, the book falls so far short of the real heart and focus that drips from every page of Scripture. The greatest motivation and reason to overcome sin is not your wife's happiness, or your own freedom, personal success, or effectiveness in ministry. Rather, the pressing motivation of our life should be our overwhelming love and affection for the Lord God. That love for God will also translate into obedience: "Jesus answered him, 'If anyone loves me, he will keep my word, and my Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him. Whoever does not love me does not keep my words. And the word that you hear is not mine but the Father's who sent me'" (English Standard Version Bible, 2001, Matthew 14:23-24). Any teaching that puts our spouse, our children, our success, or even our own life above God lays an insufficient foundation for moral purity and is essentially idolatry. What also about those who are single? The only adequate, rock-solid and immovable foundation for living and overcoming is our love for God and passion for His glory. A love for God that grows out of a deep understanding and experience of His love for us must be the primary motivator. The heart of the Bible, the greatest command, is not to love our wife and thereby live a godly life, but to love the Lord our God with all our heart and soul and mind and strength (see Matthew 22:36-40). This is to be the ultimate motivation to overcome sin. Only when we love God with our whole being are we truly able to love others rightly - not because of what they can do for us, but for God's sake and His glory. What if one's addiction to porn has so damaged and fractured the marriage relationship that the kind of love and affection we need is hopelessly out of reach? The truth is, loving our wife the way she needs to be loved is only possible if we love God first. If we love our wife with all our heart, but do not love God more, our wife then has become an idol. Too many sermons and Bible studies are all about solving our problems, making life better, and fixing things so life will be easier, and far too little about the call of every believer to love

God, glorify Him, and enjoy Him forever. Those who love God with their whole being will be tempted and may struggle with sin but will no longer continue in sexual immorality. The Lord promises to give His people power to resist and overcome temptation (see 1 Corinthians 10:13).

FOURTH, only the Holy Spirit can transform and give new desires. Self-control is a fruit of the Spirit (see Galatians 5). People are called to love God more than the gifts or delight that God gives. We must never love the gifts more than the giver of the gifts. We must also realize, though, that we need the fruit of the Holy Spirit, and they are essential for overcoming sin and living a life that honors God. People must realize the enemy takes what God made holy, and distorts it. The solution is to repent of idolatry and unbelief. Christ followers are called to die to self and must call upon the Holy Spirit to live within them. People of the church need the same "medicine" we offer in Scripture to those in the world. Does this sound too easy? The process of repentance and surrender are not easy, for it requires recognizing God for who He is and committing oneself and life to Him. Does it sound impossible? It is not impossible to those who know the all-powerful God! Christians are not superficial nor in love with an "ism" or ideology, but with God Himself and with his son, Jesus Christ.

God's redeemed people are called to make a priority of guarding their hearts, which is the source of all their desires and the seat of all their emotions, because the heart impacts life and eternity (see Proverbs 4:23). This is done through treasuring God's word by meditating on Scripture and applying it daily to life, which is effective in breaking the sins in one's life (see Psalm 119:9-11). This displaces all else that could otherwise distract people, consume their focus, and lead astray. We are supernaturally changed when we see God in His glory, ourselves as desperately in need, and others as valuable because God calls them valuable (see Isaiah 6:1-9). The transformative power of God's glory is awe-inspiring and humbling. The solution and the most effective strategy we have been searching for is ultimately found in a deep, personal, and authentic relationship with the living God. Christians who struggle in bondage to sin and sexual addictions often have a small, distorted view of God, and fail to repent of sin and submit to Him. When a person sees God in His glory and greatness, that person is shook to the very core of their existence. All other distractions and temptations pale in comparison and fade away. Isaiah 6 records the transformation that took place when Isaiah witnessed the glory of God. Isaiah trembled at the majesty and power of God, he then saw himself realistically as unclean and in need of transformation which came immediately from God, and finally he cared deeply about God's call to himself and for all other people.

"And no creature is hidden from his sight, but all are naked and exposed to the eyes of him to

whom we must give account” (English Standard Version Bible, 2001, Hebrews 4:13).

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Arterbun, S., & Stoeker, F. (2020). *Every Man’s Battle*. Waterbrook Press.
- Barna Group. (2024). [https://www.barna.com/The Porn Phenomenon](https://www.barna.com/The_Porn_Phenomenon) - Barna Group
- Godsey J.D. (2015). *The theology of Dietrich Bonhoeffer*. Wipf & Stock Publishers.
- International Journal of Innovative Social Sciences & Humanities Research 8(2):37-44, April-June, 2020 © SEAHIP PUBLICATIONS, 2020 (See www.seahipaj.org ISSN: 2354-2926
- Langteau, J., Blankenship, J., Dunham, T., & Jun, H. (2021). The culture of missions: Choosing to be mistreated. *Journal of Biblical Missiology*. June 2021
- Langteau, J., & Dunham, T. (2021). Sex trafficking and slavery in Southeast Asia: To free captives. Liberty University. *Journal of Statesmanship & Public Policy*. Vol. 2 Iss. 1.
- Lawrence, M. (2017) *Conversion: How God Creates a People*, Crossway/Good News Publishers
- Lewis, C.S. (1957). *Mere Christianity*. The MacMillan Company.
- Porn Survey. <https://www.provenmen.org/2014PornSurvey/>
- Tozer A. W. (2015). *Quotes - ChristianQuotes.info*
www.christianquotes.info/.../a-w-tozer-quotes
Jul 23, 2015
- Zillmann, D., & Bryant, J. (1988). Pornography’s impact on sexual satisfaction. *Journal of Applied Social Psychology*, Wiley Online Library.

Statements and Declarations:

The authors declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding:

The authors received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

**This article is a follow-up on a previously published research paper, Sex Trafficking and Slavery in Southeast Asia: To Free Captives, which was previously published on Asian Missions Advance in June, 2021, summer issue .*



James D. Langteau
drlangteau@gmail.com

Dr. James D. Langteau is a missionary with Empower International. He formerly served as a consultant with Wycliffe Bible Translators / SIL- International, as well as a faculty member at Payap University. Previously he founded the Marinette-Menominee Jail Outreach, Inc and led it for eight years as the first executive director, before moving his family to the foreign mission field in 2014. He earned a master degree in discipleship ministries from Liberty Baptist Theological Seminary and he earned a doctoral degree in educational leadership from Liberty University Graduate School of Education. Dr. Langteau is married and has seven children and three grandchildren.



Timothy D. Dunham

Pastor Timothy D. Dunham is the Founder and Director of the Family Connection Foundation (FCF), a non-profit organization that encompasses 15 different projects, including LIFT International and Hug, which specifically address Human Trafficking intervention. From 2017 through 2019, FCF efforts led to the conviction of approximately one-third (1/3) of all sex traffickers prosecuted annually in Thailand. FCF also provides homes for orphaned children, opportunities for better education, and training for families to be stronger and healthier. In addition, Pastor Dunham is the lead pastor of Chiang Mai Christian Fellowship (CCF) Church in Chiang Mai. He earned a master degree in counseling from Denver Seminary. Pastor Dunham is married and is a father and grandfather. To pray for or support this ministry to victims of sex trafficking, please visit: Family Connection Foundation at www.fcftailand.org.



Kenneth D. Gossett

Dr. Kenneth D. Gossett has a long and distinguished career in the field of health and human services and in education. Over the course of the past 15 years, he has been a faculty member of many universities, including Walden University, Colorado State University Global Campus, Liberty University, and Northcentral University. Dr. Gossett has published numerous peer reviewed articles and has received several academic awards. Dr. Gossett is married and has four children and many grandchildren.

Is the Local Church “Really Nice but Totally Unnecessary”?

John Edmiston

This article starts out with a hypothetical dialogue between Pastor Joe Smith and his former congregants Sam and Samantha Brown of Corner Community Church of Somewhereville, USA. The dialogue rotates around the relevance of the local church, issues of biblical and ecclesial authority, and the nature of authentic Christian spirituality in the 21st century.

Sam and Samantha are upwardly mobile professionals. Pastor Joe has an evangelical church of about 250 attendees. If the characters seem wildly exaggerated and the dialogue sounds a bit artificial it is because I am just using their debate as a vehicle to make missiological, sociological and ecclesial arguments.

Some of the arguments against the local church may seem controversial, but as mature scholars we must yet face them. There will be a lengthy conclusion to sort it all out in the end where I will show how the Asian church can respond.

Sam and Samantha: We just don't need to go to church any more Pastor Joe! We are Digital Christians, not Church Christians! We can get saved online, find good sermons online, listen to worship music on YouTube, watch preachers on TV, have a significant relationship with our local Christian radio station and our local Christian bookstore, get a theology degree online, meet a Christian partner on Christian Mingle, get ordained for five dollars from some website, and even arrange a missions trip to Mexico. We have discovered that we can live a wonderful Christian life without the clergy, without the local church, and without belonging to some kind of religious denomination! We have total freedom!

Pastor Joe: Don't you need other people? You can't be true Christians if you don't fulfill the Great Commandment to love one another. There are 37 “one-another” commandments in the New Testament¹ such as love one another, forgive one another, be patient with one another and encourage one another and those commandments need to be fulfilled in a community such as Corner Community Church!

Sam and Samantha: We encourage Christians with our awesome Tik-Tok videos! We share bible verses on Facebook, and we pray for people who text us. We forgive those who spam us and forbear with those who post nasty comments on Reddit! When we went to CCC hardly anyone ever talked to us or prayed for us. It was Samantha's birthday last week and no one from CCC said “Happy Birthday”; but over 500 people on Instagram did! Who is our community?

1. One Another Commands in the New Testament <https://overviewbible.com/one-another-infographic/>

The people who contact us, or the people who don't contact us? For us, the Christian experience is primarily a digital experience!

Pastor Joe: Did you join any of our small groups?

Sam and Samantha: They were all in the evenings during our family time. We are busy professionals with two small children and we didn't want to leave them with a baby sitter after they had been in child-care all day! Family first! Perhaps you could have provided small groups by Zoom for people like us.

Pastor Joe: But you still need other believers!

Sam and Samantha: But it is just so socially complicated at church, our generation doesn't do large groups any more.² We just want to hang out with a few other couples who are upper-middle class professionals who are just like us. We don't want to go near the drug addicts like the one who gave her testimony at CCC a few months back!

Pastor Joe: That is not a biblical or Christian view of other people! Romans tells us that we are to associate with humble people³ and James tells us we are not to discriminate against the poor man dressed in rags!⁴ Jesus even touched lepers⁵ and we can embrace people from all generations and walks of life by going to church.

Sam and Samantha: We are still baby Christians and we are not very mature and we are not up the standards of the Sermon on the Mount which is just for socialists and Democrats!⁶ We are entrepreneurs and we only want to be around other entrepreneurs!

Pastor Joe: Do you believe in biblical authority? Do you believe that what Jesus says is mandatory for you and for your lifestyle?

Sam and Samantha: What do you mean? We are Digital Christians, not Church Christians and we extract meaning from the Scriptures as it impacts our lives in the 21st Century, we don't see the Bible as actually commanding us to do anything. It's like the Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath;⁷ so, the Scriptures were made for us and not us for the

2. Millennials Lack of Social Skills <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/millennial-media/201708/are-millennials-socially-impaired-or-just-rude>

3. Romans 12:16 Live in harmony with one another. Do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly. Never be wise in your own sight.

4. James 2:1-13

5. Mark 1:40-42 And a leper came to him, imploring him, and kneeling said to him, “If you will, you can make me clean.” (41) Moved with pity, he stretched out his hand and touched him and said to him, “I will; be clean.” (42) And immediately the leprosy left him, and he was made clean.

6. Jesus Was A Socialist <https://andrewspringer.medium.com/jesus-was-a-socialist-d76a8b1fbb7f>

7. Mark 2:27-28 And he said to them, “The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath. (28) So the Son of Man is lord even of the Sabbath.”

Scriptures. The Scriptures are there for us to confess to be blessed.⁸ Why should we listen to you? You drive an old Toyota Camry!! God is not blessing you! We are smarter than you, we are richer than you, we are better looking than you. God is blessing us, the Digital Christians and God is not blessing the dowdy, boring Church Christians!

Pastor Joe: The apostles made significant sacrifices for the gospel⁹ and great was their reward in Heaven!

Sam and Samantha: Our apostle on TV has a private jet! Winner are grinners, we don't have a submissive poverty mentality. We are victors not victims.

Pastor Joe: Well, what is actually wrong with Corner Community Church?

Sam and Samantha: It is the institutional church. It was founded by the Emperor Constantine in A.D. 313¹⁰ and Christmas and Easter are pagan festivals and the clergy are just pagan priests with Bibles! Except for you, Pastor Joe.

Pastor Joe: Well I am glad about that! So, you think that all local churches are evil? Do you think that CCC is evil?

Sam and Samantha: The clergy is the patriarchy!¹¹ We don't submit to man we only submit to God!

Pastor Joe: But isn't authority just a normal part of life?

Sam and Samantha: Yes, but we are professionals and we are not going to submit to pastors, deacons and elders who are barely successful in life. They have nothing to say to us. We will only listen to successful people and to strong people!

Pastor Joe: But can't you at least attend a Sunday morning service?

Sam and Samantha: Why bother? It is our day off. We have to get up early, get the kids ready and sacrifice our time to hear a sermon that we can hear better on YouTube once the kids are in bed!

Pastor Joe: Your commitment to Christ is measured by your commitment to other people!

Sam and Samantha: Good Christians change churches all the time. You can't tell us that they aren't committed to Christ! We can only be committed to people who talk to us regularly, and the people who talk to us regularly are online, in coffee shops and at the seminars we attend, not at CCC where it is always just "Hi and bye".

Pastor Joe: But local churches have theologically qualified pastors who know Greek, Hebrew and Theology!

Sam and Samantha: It is just a circular argument. It is just the system validating the system. We don't need Greek, Hebrew or Theology, we have the Holy Spirit

8. Confess to be Blessed <https://www.hopefaithprayer.com/scriptures/confession-prosperity/>

9. Matthew 19:27-30

10. Religious Policies of Constantine the Great https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Religious_policies_of_Constantine_the_Great

11. Criticisms of Clergy and Patriarchy : <https://relevantmagazine.com/faith/church/3-ways-womens-equality-can-counteract-abuse/>

and we are not taught by man, rather we are taught by God! Jesus and the apostles were not validated by the theological system of their day, they were not members of the Sanhedrin!

Pastor Joe: What about the traditions of the Church, the creeds, the deep thinking of many people over many centuries about the Trinity and the Incarnation?

Sam and Samantha: We only need the truth that we can apply. If we cannot live it, why believe it? What are the real-world consequences of Monophysitism?¹² We are too busy for theology. We know God through experience.

Pastor Joe: So where do you encounter God?

Sam and Samantha: We encounter God online, mainly through YouTube worship. We also encounter God with our friends, in nature and in the things that God does to help our multi-level marketing business.

Pastor Joe: That's ridiculous! God would never help a multi-level marketing business! God only helps pastors and missionaries! The love of money is the root of all kinds of evil!¹³

Sam and Samantha: Our generation is going to create an interplanetary, transhumanist future¹⁴ where we have our brains integrated with computers, where God is the Universal Spirit, and truth is "what works".¹⁵ Our Messiah will be the artificially-intelligent Leader who gives us eternal life here on earth through the New Genetics.¹⁶ We want to be like Elon Musk, not like the Apostle Paul!

Pastor Joe: That is called the spirit of antichrist¹⁷ and the spirit of lawlessness!¹⁸ It is unbiblical, and it is not Christian.

Sam and Samantha: You have a culture of obedience to righteousness and holiness, but that is just for losers. Winners don't obey anyone. Winners believe and achieve self-transcendence! We can take drugs, have open marriages, multiple partners and conceive multiple children through IVF like Elon has.

Pastor Joe: Are you actually doing any of that?

Sam and Samantha: No, not yet, but we might, and we don't want you holding us back.

Pastor Joe: Do you believe in the existence of an immortal soul that survives death?

Sam and Samantha: No, not any more.

Pastor Joe: Do you believe that there is quality of being as well as quantity of being? Do you believe it is better to be a loving person than a selfish person?

12. Monophysitism <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Monophysitism>

13. 1 Timothy 6:6-10

14. Interplanetary Transhumanism <https://medium.com/@timventura/natasha-vita-more-on-transhumanism-space-colonization-e68c6ffb1777>

15. Truth Is What Works <https://www.amazon.com/Truth-What-Works-William-Pragmatism/dp/0847692736>

16. Eternal Life Through Genetics <https://medium.com/@cybertec/the-technology-that-could-make-us-immortal-2b85c71a5329>

17. 1 John 4:3 and every spirit that does not confess Jesus is not from God. This is the spirit of the antichrist, which you heard was coming and now is in the world already.

18. 2 Thessalonians 2:3 Let no one deceive you in any way. For that day will not come, unless the rebellion comes first, and the man of lawlessness is revealed, the son of destruction,

Sam and Samantha: Loving people are weak, selfish people are strong; and we need to be selfish and strong if we are to be winners in this world!¹⁹ Why should we help anyone other than ourselves?

Pastor Joe (quoting Scripture): 1 John 2:15-17 *Do not love the world nor the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. (16) Because everything that is in the world--the lust of the flesh, and the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life--is not from the Father but is from the world. (17) And the world is passing away, and its lust; but he who does the will of God abides forever.*

Sam and Samantha: It is not passing away, religion is passing away! The real world is the real world, and we will have eternal life, here and now, in this world, through the New Genetics!

Pastor Joe: Isn't that a religious belief that you have created? After all there is no sign of anyone having eternal life through new genetics at the moment! Lifespans are actually going down here in the USA!²⁰

Sam and Samantha: It will be only for the rich people, and we have to be millionaires to afford eternal life, and to become millionaires we must be selfish!

Pastor Joe: Christianity has provided a very stable and successful basis for life and culture for thousands of years, whenever it has been taken seriously. Nearly all the top twenty countries on the Human Development Index²¹ were once strongly influenced by Protestant Christian values at some point in their history.

Sam and Samantha: We are in a new spiritual age, the age of Aquarius,²² and we need a new spirituality, for the age of Spiritual Consciousness. Christianity is passé! It is old hat!

Pastor Joe: What has the New Age movement actually done to benefit society? Where are the New Age schools, New Age hospitals, New Age nursing homes, New Age development organizations? Look at all the Christian schools, Christian hospitals, Christian nursing homes and Christian aid organizations like Samaritan's Purse!

Sam and Samantha: We are just getting started!

Pastor Joe: It has been around since the 1960's and accomplished, zip, nothing and nada. The New Age movement is just futile self-absorption!

Sam and Samantha: There is nothing wrong with being self-absorbed!

Pastor Joe: Every verse in the Bible speaks against being self-absorbed. The whole idea of loving your neighbor as yourself speaks against being self-absorbed. In the parable of the Good Samaritan the priest and the Levite were self-absorbed but the

Good Samaritan saw the injured man and was other-centered and helpful! If Jesus was self-absorbed He would never have left the glory of heaven to come to earth and save us!

1 John 3:16-18 *By this we have come to know love, because He laid down His life for us. And we also ought to lay down our lives in behalf of our brothers. (17) But whoever has this world's goods, and sees his brother having need, and shuts off his compassion towards him, how does the love of God abide in him? (18) My little children, let us not love in word or in tongue, but in deed and in truth.*

Sam and Samantha: I don't see any good reason why we should give to the poor, give to a church or give to anyone at all. The poor are just lazy parasites according to Ayn Rand.²³

Pastor Joe: What if there is an eternal judgment that depends on how you treat the poor and needy?

Sam and Samantha: We believe in "once saved, always saved", we have our ticket to Heaven and its all by grace not works, and we don't have to give to the poor!

Pastor Joe: Have you read Luke 16? The parable of the rich man and Lazarus?

Sam and Samantha: No, what is that?

Pastor Joe: Here, I will read it to you!

Luke 16:19-31 *"Now there was a certain rich man who was clothed in purple and fine linen, enjoying himself splendidly every day. (20) But there was a certain beggar named Lazarus, covered with sores, who had been placed at his gate, (21) and longing to be fed with the crumbs which fell from the rich man's table. And even the dogs came and would lick his sores. (22) And it came to pass that the beggar died, and he was carried away by the angels to Abraham's bosom. The rich man also died and was buried. (23) And being in torments in Hades, he lifted up his eyes and saw Abraham from afar, and Lazarus in his bosom. (24) Then he cried and said, 'Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus so that he may dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue; for I am suffering in this flame.' (25) But Abraham said, 'Child, remember that in your lifetime you received your good things, and likewise Lazarus bad things, but now here he is comforted and you are suffering. (26) And besides all this, between us and you a great gulf has been fixed, so that those who desire to cross over from here to you are not able, nor may those from there cross over to us.' (27) Then he said, 'Therefore I beseech you, father, that you would send him to my father's house, (28) for I have five brothers, so that he may testify to them, lest they also come to this place of torment.' (29) Abraham said to him, 'They have Moses and the prophets; let them hear them.' (30) And he said, 'No, father Abraham; but if someone from the dead should go to them, they will repent.' (31) But he said to him, 'If they do not hear Moses and the prophets, neither will they be persuaded should one rise from the dead.' "*

Now tell me, the rich man was living his best life now, so why did the rich man end up in the fires of Hell?

19. Discussion of Ayn Rand's "The Virtue of Selfishness" https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Virtue_of_Selfishness

20. Falling USA Life Expectancy <https://www.health.harvard.edu/blog/why-life-expectancy-in-the-us-is-falling-202210202835>

21. Human Development Index https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_countries_by_Human_Development_Index

22. Age of Aquarius https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Age_of_Aquarius

23. Producers and Parasites <https://reason.com/1975/09/01/the-two-classes/>

Sam and Samantha: We don't believe in Hell!

Pastor Joe: Please answer my question!

Sam and Samantha: Well, according to Jesus, the rich man ended up in Hell because he was selfish, self-absorbed, stingy and very disobedient to Moses and the prophets! Anyway, we believe in grace not works!

Pastor Joe: Grace is for those who repent, the rich man did not repent, he was still selfish in the fires of Hell and wanted Lazarus to provide water for him!

Sam and Samantha: Jesus would never send anyone into Hell!

Pastor Joe: Well actually Jesus will judge all the nations on the last day and all the selfish nasty people will be assigned to everlasting torment!

Sam and Samantha: Where on earth is that in the Bible?

Pastor Joe: It is in Matthew 25, would you like me to read it to you?

Sam and Samantha: Probably not, but go ahead anyway!

Pastor Joe: (reading Scripture): Matthew 25:31-46
"And when the Son of Man comes in His glory, and all the holy angels with Him, then will He sit upon His glorious throne. (32) All the nations will be gathered before Him, and He will separate them one from another, as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. (33) And He will set the sheep on His right hand, but the goats on His left. (34) Then the King will say to those on His right hand, 'Come, you blessed of My Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world: (35) for I was hungry and you gave Me food; I was thirsty and you gave Me drink; I was a stranger and you took Me in; (36) I was naked and you clothed Me; I was sick and you visited Me; I was in prison and you came to Me.' (37) 'Then the righteous will answer Him, saying, 'Lord, when did we see You hungry and feed You, or thirsty and give You drink? (38) When did we see You a stranger and take You in, or naked and clothe You? (39) Or when did we see You sick, or in prison, and come to You?' (40) 'And the King will answer and say to them, 'Assuredly I say to you, inasmuch as you did it to one of the least of these My brothers, you did it to Me.' (41) 'Then He will also say to those on the left, 'Depart from Me, you cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels: (42) for I was hungry and you gave Me no food; I was thirsty and you gave Me no drink; (43) I was a stranger and you did not take Me in, naked and you did not clothe Me, sick and in prison and you did not visit Me.' (44) 'Then they also will answer, saying, 'Lord, when did we see You hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and we did not minister to You?' (45) 'Then He will answer them, saying, 'Assuredly I say to you, inasmuch as you did not do it to one of the least of these, neither did you do it to Me.' (46) 'And these shall go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.'"

Sam and Samantha: So, it seems like the Bible is extremely serious about being kind and loving instead of selfish and mean?

Pastor Joe: Yes, it is and that is why Christianity is the basis of successful civilizations where

people genuinely look after each other. Most social movements such as trade unions, nursing and community colleges were started by Christians.²⁴ It was a group of evangelical Christians in England, called the Clapham Sect, and led by John Wilberforce that got slavery banned throughout the British Empire!

Sam and Samantha: We did not know that!

Pastor Joe: The media will never tell you anything positive about Christianity.

Sam and Samantha: That is for sure, we feel as if we are always being lied to!

Pastor Joe: The Bible is also very serious about Christians being in Spirit-filled community and not just being isolated individuals.

Sam and Samantha: That is not even subtle! It sounds like you are trying to get us to go back to Corner Community Church!

Pastor Joe: Church is not just about education. It is also about participation and impartation!

Sam and Samantha: Impartation! What is spiritual impartation?

Pastor Joe: The early church laid hands on people for healing, for the baptism in the Holy Spirit, for imparting spiritual gifts, and when they ordained elders, deacons and Christian workers.²⁵ This spiritual impartation happens in community. You cannot lay hands on yourself for healing.

Sam and Samantha: I suppose not. However, we have never seen a healing miracle.

Pastor Joe: Well then, why don't you come to our Wednesday night healing service next week when Paul Rapley²⁶ will be ministering, he sees a lot of healings all around the world!

Next Wednesday

Sam and Samantha: That was incredible! And we know the lady who had the metal plate disappear and the boy whose broken leg was healed. I had no idea that miracles still happen today. Spiritual power is real and the name of Jesus is real! This changes everything we once knew about God!

Pastor Joe: Yes, it does, God is alive and well today!

Sam and Samantha: But can't this happen in house churches like it did in the Book of Acts?

Pastor Joe: Some of those houses in Acts were even larger than CCC! The house of Mary, the mother of John-Mark and sister of Barnabas, could accommodate 120 people just in an upper room.²⁷ It was probably a Roman villa with courtyards, atriums, stables, great rooms and so on. Roman villas were typically from 900 square meters to 5400 square meters (9,000 – 54,000 square feet).²⁸ The house of the Roman centurion

24. <https://jasonpierce.org/15-ways-christianity-changed-history-and-society/> (Christian Social Movements)

25. The Laying On of Hands in the Bible https://www.openbible.info/topics/laying_on_of_hands

26. About Paul Rapley <https://www.paulrapley.com/about> click on the Testimonies link for interesting testimonies.

27. Acts 1:12-15,12:12

28. Roman Villas https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Roman_villa & <https://earlychurchhistory.org/daily-life/ancient-roman-villas/>

Cornelius could accommodate a large crowd to listen to the Apostle Peter and the house of Philemon had so many rooms that Paul could instruct him to set aside a room for him without appearing the least bit rude.

Sam and Samantha: What about the house churches in China?

Pastor Joe: Sure, when the church is persecuted, then house churches are a great idea! The church can take many different physical forms.

Sam and Samantha: We watched a video about house churches as part of DMMS (Discipleship-Making Movements) and they seem part of the key to rapid church multiplication in creative access nations.

Pastor Joe: They certainly are! However, it's not either/or but both/and! Christians can meet in basilicas, cathedrals, mega-churches, storefront churches, parish churches, homes, villas and even in a local business! It's not the container that matters! It is the gathering of holy saints to learn true doctrine, take the sacraments, to participate in spiritual life with one another and to impart Christ to one another. We are God's temples, not any human building:

Acts 17:24-25 The God who made the world and everything in it, being Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in temples made by man, (25) nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mankind life and breath and everything.

Sam and Samantha: If God does not dwell in buildings made by human hands, then why do we need to go to Corner Community Church?

Pastor Joe: You tell me!

Sam and Samantha: So we can have fellowship with one another, see miracles and experience God, be taught the word of God and participate with one another in the life of Christ. But can't we do all of that, or at least most of it, online? Going to church is just so inconvenient.

Pastor Joe: Would it help you if we livestreamed our services and gave you some digital means of involvement in the life of our church such as having small groups that meet by Zoom so you don't have to hire a baby-sitter?

Sam and Samantha: Yes, that would be very helpful and we want to give online so we don't have to carry cash or write checks, and we want email notices not snail mail. We would also like to be part of a text prayer chain for our own age group and not just Boomers with arthritis!

Pastor Joe: I am sure that we can do all those things, and even come up with a Young Professionals Prayer Group. Perhaps CCC has been way behind with the digital revolution!

Sam and Samantha: And perhaps we did not understand the need to be part of the Church Gathered. It was only when we saw miracles that we changed our mind. For us, the local church seemed like a very nice place that was totally unnecessary. We felt that we could be just fine without ever going to church ever again.

Pastor Joe: It is a very confusing and busy world

out there, and we pastors have to do a much better job of helping people to be part of a church experience that works for them. We need to do a much better job of reaching the Digital Christians and of explaining why the local church still has an important place in the life of believers!

CONCLUSION

I apologize if I have offended anyone by making you stare into the abyss that is the self-centered, materialistic and almost apostate American Church.²⁹ However, some of these issues might soon infect the church in Asia.

I have attempted to tackle 20 hot topics during this hypothetical debate, and they are:

1. Digital disintermediation of essential church functions
2. The need for a digital ecclesiology
3. Impersonal churches versus digital attention and connection
4. Generational conflict
5. Class conflict
6. Individualism and the inability of some people to socialize in large groups
7. Antinomianism and the consequent rejection of all ecclesiastical authority
8. Poor and ill-informed Church History
9. The "house church only" debate
10. The Prosperity Gospel
11. Ayn Rand, Objectivism, and the exaltation of selfishness
12. Transhumanism
13. Secular religion
14. The New Age Movement
15. Hypergrace
16. Self-absorption and the lack of godly compassion
17. The hurried lifestyle that sees personal convenience as an absolute
18. Church as participation and impartation
19. The need for signs and wonders for a new generation of pagans
20. How to negotiate church structures and services in a changing cultural milieu

These complex issues simply did not exist as issues for local church pastors or missionaries when I went off to seminary in 1980. Now, they have combined into a perfect storm! There are constant daily attacks on such basic ideas as the need to love our neighbor. Some Republican Christians have become so extreme as to reject the Sermon on The Mount! Listen to the following quote from prominent Southern Baptist Russell Moore:

"Multiple pastors tell me, essentially, the same story about quoting the Sermon on the Mount, parenthetically, in their preaching – 'turn the other cheek' – [and] to have someone come up after to say,

²⁹ Only 4% of Americans hold a Biblical worldview: <https://www.arizonachristian.edu/2023/02/28/biblical-worldview-among-u-s-adults-drops-33-since-start-of-covid-19-pandemic/>

‘Where did you get those liberal talking points?’ Moore said.³⁰

The congregants questioning their pastors who quote Jesus, are as awash in false philosophy as Sam and Samantha Brown were. And these demonic false philosophies always revolt against the idea of church attendance, often twisting church history to make their point. Ignoring these uncomfortable issues will not make them go away. We have to be prepared to give an answer to the question of “Is the local church very nice, but totally unnecessary?”

Ecclesiology is now at the forefront of missiology. COVID shifted the balance toward digital Christianity and now, just as firms are trying to enforce return-to-office, churches are similarly asking: “Will you return to church, or will you stay in the digital wasteland that you are now comfortable with?”

The USA, Australia, New Zealand and Europe are largely post-Christian societies with large numbers of “new pagans”³¹ who have relativized and pluralist values inimical to most standard theological formulations but which are very open to spiritual experiences such as signs and wonders.

The Kingdom of God is an everlasting Kingdom³² which takes many forms. This Kingdom is now a primarily digital space for hundreds of millions of Christians whose apostles, prophets, evangelists, teachers and pastors are on YouTube, Facebook and Tik-Tok. Some spend many hours each week watching Christian videos, and hardly any time in a local church.

Church (for them) is nice but unnecessary. An historical tradition. A connection with the ancient world of Boomers and Old-Timers who were lifelong members of their churches. For the newer generations, church is just too complicated, and relating to strangers is hard. The local church feels good but it’s kind of “in the way” of the rest of life.

Everyone needs a call to community and for them community is on social media, in coffee shops and in small group Bible studies that are far less socially challenging than dealing with church committees and business meetings. So, the local church just fades away, once a week becomes once a month, becomes twice a year.³³

Churches will need to adopt digitally-informed small groups that practice the gifts of the Spirit and study the Word of God in-depth. They will need to have horizontal servant-leadership rather than vertical leadership. They will have to vastly simplify the social stress of being a church member. Churches need to understand the rush and stress of 21st century life and

30. Russell Moore quote <https://www.newsweek.com/evangelicals-rejecting-jesus-teachings-liberal-talking-points-pastor-1818706>

31. New Pagans in Australia <https://au.thegospelcoalition.org/article/now-post-post-christian-pagan-australia/>

32. Daniel 7:14

33. Church Attendance Statistics (USA) <https://www.churchtrac.com/articles/the-state-of-church-attendance-trends-and-statistics-2023> (note Millennials are actually increasing in church attendance due to Millennial migrant churches.)

have some programs that can meet spiritual needs “on the go” and which do not compel Christians to visit a bricks-and-mortar building.

The knee-jerk reaction is to denigrate Digital Christians as “obviously immature” and digital Christianity as “seriously deficient”. It is easy to ignore the digital challenge. About eight years ago I met with a Filipino pastor of a church of some 600 people. I asked Pastor Ken “How many people asked you a serious theological question last year?” His reply was “Two, no, it was one”. I followed up my question with “Do you know where the rest asked their questions?” Ken said “No”. I replied, “Google”.

The Church is now experienced by Asian Christians as both global and digital. They will listen to a Singaporean bible teacher, an American bible prophecy expert, a Nigerian apostle and a Filipino Christian gospel artist, all on the same day! The sheep now have many shepherds!

The local church is no longer the authoritative source of spiritual information. They have lost that role to the Internet. We need to provide something else. We need to provide whatever is missing in the busy lives of 21st century Asian Christians. Some of these things might include:

- A clear Gospel that refutes Western apostasy
- An Asian apologetic for biblical Christian values in the face of materialism
- Incredibly supportive small groups that pray for one another
- Business mentoring
- Personal discipleship and spiritual formation
- Opportunities for business-as-mission
- Spiritual support for aspirational Asian professionals
- Prayer for the sick
- Signs and wonders
- Deliverance from curses, hexes and spells
- Family counselling that includes extended family issues
- Digital short-courses on issues of gospel and culture in Asia
- Ministry to and through the mobile phone such as daily devotionals
- Church websites that support digital interaction among members of the congregation and enhance the experience of fellowship



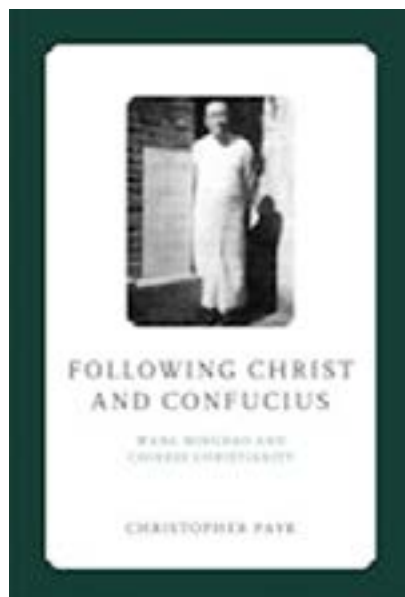
John Edmiston
digitalopportunities@gmail.com

John Edmiston is the CEO of Cybermissions and also teaches courses in in Theology of Technology, Mobile Ministry and Emerging Media Ministry. John has been in Internet Ministry since 1991 and was one of the first to do full-time Christian ministry on the Internet.

BOOK REVIEW

Following Christ and Confucius: Wang Mingdao and Chinese Christianity. by Payk, Christopher

Stephen Panda Bamboo



Following Christ and Confucius: Wang Mingdao and Chinese Christianity

by Payk, Christopher

Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 2024.

227 pages,

ISBN: 978-0-268-20824-0

Payk Christopher explores the impact of Wang Mingdao's life and work in the social context of 20th century China. He elaborates Wang's Confucian Christian thoughts that were deeply influenced by "the Chinese classics, sages, and histories" (Chapter 7, p. 151).

Payk argues against Richard Cook's conclusion that Wang Mingdao was not a theologian because he was not proficient in "academic Christian theology" (Chapter 1, p. 10). However, Payk states that Wang should be regarded as an important theologian like John Wesley, even though he lacks formal systematic training in theology (Chapter 1, p. 11). Neither Wang nor Wesley's theological talents were reflected in the field of complex academic theology. Their theology was a kind of folk theology. Wesley was committed to clearly expressing the core essence of Christian theology to ordinary believers (Chapter 1, p. 11). Wang intended to demonstrate the implementation of Christian theology in practical actions by upholding a moral life of integrity (Chapter 7, p. 146-47). Furthermore, Payk considers Wang to be "a Confucian Christian theologian" because Chinese classics, sages and history have shaped his theological thinking (Chapter 7, p. 145). Wang fully absorbed the profound historical and cultural heritage and moral and ethical

concepts of Chinese Confucian tradition (Chapter 1, p. 11). This book sorts out the influence of Confucian Christian thought on Wang at different stages of his life.

During Wang's formative years, before the age of 21, he was taught by a Confucian Christian teacher at Tsui Primary School. H. L. Zia's Confucian Christian teachings had an impact on Wang. Then an older schoolmate shared his Christian faith with Wang (Chapter 2). When he was studying at Tsui, he memorized a lot of Chinese classics (Chapter 5, p. 119). In the course of his independent period from 1921 to 1937, Confucian culture was his mode of thinking and way of interacting with others (Chapter 3). Throughout the time of the conflict period of 1937-1955, Wang's writings increasingly drew on Chinese classics and ancient texts to encourage Christians to live moral lives in the difficult situation of the Second Sino-Japanese War (Chapter 4, p. 87-88). Wang used the convictions of ancient Chinese historical figures to solidify his refusal to join the Japanese-controlled labor union (Chapter 4, p. 89-92). Wang was also influenced by the idea of a Confucian scholar from the Southern Song Dynasty, who believed that morality should influence politics, which led him to refuse to join the Three-Self Patriotic Movement (Chapter 4, p.

96-100). Over the span of his imprisonment from 1955 to 1980, he reflected on ancient Chinese history and carefully studied several books on Confucian thought (Chapter 5). For the duration of staying in Shanghai City from 1980 to 1991, Wang incorporated traditional Chinese classics into biblical teachings in his sermons and conversations with visitors. In addition, he embodied the most comprehensive proof of Confucian thought and Christianity in his "Rehabilitation Request Manuscript" (Chapter 6, p. 132-33).

Wang placed great emphasis on Chinese Confucian classics and Chinese historical works. He integrated Confucian classics, sage stories and historical books into his theological tradition. This highlighted his unique identity as a Chinese Christian theologian

Furthermore, this book argues that Wang Mingdao's theological approach followed John Wesley's Wesleyan Quadrilateral. However, the main difference is in his use of Confucian tradition. Wang placed great emphasis on Chinese Confucian classics and Chinese historical works. He integrated Confucian classics, sage stories and historical books into his theological

tradition. This highlighted his unique identity as a Chinese Christian theologian (Chapter 7, p. 153-54).

One weakness of this book is the tendency to constantly present the Confucian thought or some heroes in Chinese history as a major influence on Wang's life. Even when Wang was released from prison, the author highlighted the influence of Confucian visitors. This gives the impression that when Christians face problems, they might seek inspiration from Confucian classics or heroes in Chinese history, rather than drawing guidance from the principles of the Bible.

This book expounds on another aspect of Wang's ideas from the perspective of his being deeply shaped by traditional Chinese Confucian thought. As a Christian theologian with significant influence in the Confucian context, Wang's thoughts and experiences still inspire and motivate contemporary Chinese Christians. This book is recommended to those who are concerned about the development of the Chinese church.

Reviewer
Stephen Panda Bamboo
Intercultural Studies Program
Asia Graduate School of Theology-Philippines
stfoursv@gmail.com

asian missions advance

Quarterly Bulletin of the Asia Missions Association *published by*
the East-West Center for Missions Research & Development

*ASIAN MISSIONS ADVANCE, published from 1978 to 1993 by the East-West Center for Missions Research & Development
as the Occasional Bulletin of the Asia Missions Association, has re-started publishing from August 2011
as the Quarterly Bulletin of the Asia Missions Association by the East-West Center for Missions Research & Development*

1520 James M Wood Blvd, #303, Los Angeles, CA 90015, USA
www.asiamissions.net | www.ewcmrd.org
voice/fax: +1 626 577 5564 | email: missionsadvance@gmail.com

ISSN 2765-0936

Editor

Steve K. Eom

Managing Editor

Damples Dulcero - Baclagon

Contributing Editors

Chris Sung; Lalano Badoy
K. Y. Cheung Teng; Isaac Soundaraja; Yohanes Nahuway;
Chong Pae Kim; Chansamone Saiyasak ; Hong Yang

Publisher

East-West Center for MRD Publishing