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Editor
Prabo Mihindukulasuriya

Founding Editor
G. P. V. Somaratna

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JCTS 2025: BIO PROFILES

Jacob Cherian BSc, BD, BD Ext., ThM, PhD
Jacob is Dean of Faculty at Centre for Global Leadership Development, Bangalore, of which Southern Asia Bible College is a unit. He teaches New Testament and has been on the faculty of CGLD since 1987. He has degrees from Jabalpur University, SABC, Senate of Serampore College, Regent College, and Princeton Theological Seminary. He was one of the editors of and contributors to the *South Asia Bible Commentary* (2015). He is a member of the board of the World Alliance for Pentecostal Theological Education (www.wapte.org). Jacob's Bible teaching videos are accessible on YouTube.

Shari de Costa BA (Hons), MA
Shari is a graduate of Mills College, California (English and History) and CTS (MA in Biblical Studies). She wrote ger MA thesis on "Thy Kingdom Come: An Exploration of the Need for Balanced Theology of the Kingdom of God for the Church in Sri Lanka." She is currently studying in the MTh programme of Union School of Theology. Shari is the Technical and Copywriting Lead at Executive Writer, and co-founder/partner of Kiribath Publishers, which produces children's literature on parental disputes, income disparity, and environmental awareness. She serves as a pastor of the Foursquare Gospel Church Sri Lanka.

Ajith Fernando MSc, MDiv, MTh, DD
Ajith was the National Director of Youth for Christ Sri Lanka for over thirty years and now serves as Teaching Director. He received master's degrees from Asbury Theological Seminary and Fuller Seminary. He was awarded honorary Doctor of Divinity degrees from Asbury, Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, Gordon-Conwell Seminary, and Tyndale Seminary in Canada. He is an internationally acclaimed evangelist, preacher, teacher, and author. He has published 21 books in twenty languages. They

include the *NIV Application Commentary: Acts* (Zondervan, 1998), *Sharing the Truth in Love* (Discovery House, 2001), *Jesus Driven Ministry* (Crossway, 2002), *The Call to Joy and Pain* (Crossway, 2007), *Preaching the Word Commentary: Deuteronomy* (Crossway, 2012), *Reclaiming Love* (Zondervan 2013), *Discipling in a Multicultural World* (Crossway, 2019), and *Joyful Perseverance* (Crossway, 2024). Ajith is a Founding Council Member and Former President of CTS.

Prabo Mihindukulasuriya PgDipM (CIM), MACS, PhD
Prabo is Assistant Professor of the History of Christianity at Regent College, Vancouver. He taught on the fulltime faculty of CTS from 2004 to 2021 and also served as Deputy Principal. He studied at Regent College (MACS 2000) and University of Colombo (PhD 2019). His publications include *Unmasking the Empire* (Social Scientists' Association, 2023) and *The 'Nestorian' Cross and the Persian Christians of the Anuradhapura Period* (CTS, 2011). He is currently an Adjunct Lecturer of CTS and Editor of *JCTS*.

Ivor Poobalan BA (Hons), ThM, PhD
Ivor has served as Principal of CTS since 1998. He is a graduate of the London School of Theology and Trinity Evangelical Divinity School. He earned his doctorate from the University of Cape Town and his thesis was published as *Who is "the God of This Age"? Paul and the Sovereignty of God in 2 Corinthians 4:4* (Langham Academic, 2024). Ivor serves as Co-Chair of the Theology Working Group of the Lausanne Movement. He is the author of *Everything Has Become New! Paul's Letter to the Ephesians.* He is a contributor to *Asian Christian Theology: Evangelical Perspectives* (Langham, 2019), *South Asia Bible Commentary* (Langham, 2015), *NIV God's Justice Bible* (Zondervan, 2016), and *NIV Understand the Faith Study Bible* (Zondervan, 2015), and *Whole-Life Mission for the Whole Church* (Langham, 2021). Ivor is Chairperson of Global Impact. He is a leader at Kollupitiya Methodist Church, ministering through preaching, youth guidance, and teaching teenagers in Sunday School.

Ted Rubesh BA, MA, DMiss
Ted is a graduate of Multnomah University. As a long-time resident in Sri Lanka, he pursued research in the intersection between biblical, cultural, and diaspora stidies. He obtained a master's degrees in missiology from Fuller Seminary, and a doctorate in intercultural studies from Western Seminary. Ted is the co-author of *Wandering Jews and Scattered Sri Lankans* (2014), and contributor to *Homosexuality: A Christian Perspective and Response* (CTS, 2017). He is the co-founder of Kandy Bible Fellowship Church, where he served as pastor for many years. He has served as an Adjunct Lecturer at CTS for many years in the undergraduate and master's programmes.

G P V Somaratna BA, MA (Missiology), MA (Theology), PGDip (Demography), PhD
Prof. Somaratna is Research Professor Emeritus at CTS. He received his PhD in 1969 from the University of London for his thesis "Political History of the Kingdom of Kotte (c. A.D. 1400-1521)". He was Professor of Modern History at the University of Colombo, and has been Visiting Professor at the Truman Institute of the Hebrew University (Jerusalem), Lee University (USA), and Fuller Theological Seminary (USA). Prof. Somaratna is the author of numerous books in English and Sinhala, including *Kotahena Riot, 1883: A Religious Riot in Sri Lanka* (Deepanee, 1991), the seven-volume *Sinhala Bible Encyclopaedia* (CTS, 2005-2015), *Life and Times of W J T Small in Sri Lanka* (CTS, 2013), and *History of Christianity in Sri Lanka* (CTS, 2016). He is the co-author with Richard Fox Young of *Vain Debates: The Buddhist-Christian Controversies of Nineteenth Century Ceylon* (Ricci Institute, 1996). He is the Founding Editor of JCTS.

EDITORIAL

In Times of Chaos, Jesus is Our Shepherd

Since the beginning of this year, the fragile world-order that has prevailed over the past 80 years (since the end of WWII) has been turned upside down. It's hard not to feel anxious, not just for the nations of the world, but also for the global church. When President Trump announced, after bombing Iran's nuclear facilities at Israel's bidding, "We love you God, and we love our great military," the message was loud and clear. A large proportion of American Evangelicals are heavily implicated in the current tide of US politics, with dangerous consequences for vulnerable minority Christian communities in in North Africa, Middle East, and South Asia. When emperors co-opt the language of divine favour to mask their military aggression and economic greed, the church in its euphoria has all too often compromised its prophetic independence and blurred the distinction between God's will on earth and human will to power. The outcome has always been the same. The church has sold its birthright in Christ for a mess of political pottage while the lives of millions of ordinary people on every continent have been plunged into chaos and driven further into the arms of exploitation and extremism. The targeting of reciprocal tariffs against Sri Lanka, a nation struggling to recover from economic collapse, is a demonstration of this blatantly un-Christian model of policymaking. The arrogance of autocrats and the greed of oligarchs only mean one thing – ordinary people (the very people they claim they want to make more secure and prosperous) suffer.

When Jesus walked through the villages and towns of Galilee, he saw the daily struggles of ordinary people all around him. He healed their diseases and drove out evil spirits, but the most life-changing thing he did was to *teach them*. Mark states that "when Jesus landed and saw a large

crowd, he had compassion on them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd. So he began teaching them many things" (6:34). People have remarkably resilient instincts to survive severe physical hardships. But they are highly susceptible to ideas, beliefs, and propaganda – whether they be truths, half-truths, or lies. Jesus taught them how to differentiate between the truth and the lies – political lies and religious lies. He warned against both "the leaven of the Pharisees and of Herod" (Mark 8:15). He alerted them to be suspicious, especially of those who speak in the name of religion, "the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadduccees" (Matt. 16:6). Instead, Jesus announces to them the good news of God's reconciling and liberating rule which has begun in his own incarnate Sonship. Jesus takes great pains to reveal to them, that the inbreaking of this Spirit-empowered new creation-order is first experienced by the creation of a new humanity that he himself creates in the midst of exploitation and oppression. Matthew writes, "When [Jesus] saw the crowds, He was moved with compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd."

The simile "like sheep without a shepherd" goes back to the Hebrew Scriptures. We first see it when Moses prays that God would appoint a successor after him, so that the Israelites "will not be like sheep without a shepherd" (Num. 27:17). Next, we see it when the prophet Micaiah warms that the ill-advised Israelite army would be abandoned on the battlefield "like sheep without a shepherd" (1 Kings 22:17). But the connection that Jesus was almost certainly making was to the prophecy in Ezekiel 34. When Ezekiel, who is himself now in exile in Babylon, starts receiving messages of hope and restoration rather than doom. God promises restorative justice to ordinary Israelites who had been oppressed by two powerful groups of people in their social ranks.

Firstly, in vv. 1-10, God condemns the "Shepherds of Israel", their ruling elites who had willfully neglected their assigned responsibilities to administer justice and welfare.

Not being content with their remuneration and privileges ("milk, curds, and wool"), the ruling class had neglected, abused, and killed ordinary citizens.

> You have not strengthened the weak; you have not healed the sick; you have not bound up the injured; you have not brought back the strays; you have not sought the lost, but with force and harshness you have ruled them. So they were scattered because there was no shepherd, and scattered they became food for all the wild animals. (4-5)

Secondly, the Lord then promises to replace these cruel, self-serving, shepherds with His own direct rule (vv. 11-16).

> I will seek the lost, and I will bring back the strays, and I will bind up the injured, and I will strengthen the weak, but the fat and the strong I will destroy. I will feed them with justice (v. 16).

This divine kingship, Jeremiah later elaborates, God will exercise through the restoration of "my servant David" (23-24). We are not told how the long-dead David will be raised to be Israel's once and future king. Somehow David's rule will be embodied in a messianic king mediating God's perfect justice. Interestingly, Ezekiel's older contemporary Jeremiah has handed down a very similar oracle in 23:1-8. There too the prophet condemns the self-serving shepherds, promises to re-establish the just rule of David, but also adds another important element to his promise of restoration. Under the messianic and Davidic Chief Shepherd, the Lord promises to send Israel many compassionate shepherds. "I will raise up shepherds over them who will shepherd them, and they shall no longer fear or be dismayed, nor shall any be missing, says the Lord" (v. 4).

This reference to a plurality of shepherds serving under the Lord's own paramount shepherding is one of the earliest usages of this imagery in the Hebrew Scriptures. It may well be the Hebrew scriptural source of the designation 'shepherd' (*poimen*) for the function of pastoral care in

the NT. If that is indeed the case, it certainly enriches our understanding of what pastoral care entails as a prophecy about restored Israel fulfilled in the Israel of God.

Far more distressing than the reckless powerplays of political leaders is the spiritual, sexual, and physical abuse inflicted on innocent children and gullible adults by so-called priests, pastors, and prophets. Reading about these acts of abuse by clergy with Jeremiah 23 and Ezekiel 34 in the background is all the more reason why such crimes must be diligently safeguarded against, and decisively dealt with.

As a seminary community who seek to impart and receive pastoral formation in the image of Jesus our Shepherd must take sober note of these warnings. The next part of Ezekiel's oracle is directed at the whole people of God, clergy and laity alike.

Thirdly, then, (vv. 17-22) Ezekiel directs the Lord's judgement not only against the cruel shepherds who are the exploitative rulers but also against the sheep – the common citizenry themselves. Tragically, as often happens under prolonged conditions of economic hardship, the oppressed begin to imitate their oppressors and begin to exploit the weaker members of their social order. In the interest of maintaining their power, rulers often instigate hatred between social groups. One class of citizens feel entitled to more than their fair share of resources and prevents the rest from having access to them.

> Therefore, thus says the Lord God to them: I myself will judge between the fat sheep and the lean sheep. 21 Because you pushed with flank and shoulder and butted at all the weak animals with your horns until you scattered them far and wide, 22 I will save my flock, and they shall no longer be ravaged, and I will judge between sheep and sheep. (20-22)

Adversity does not always produce unity. Where there are inequalities to begin with, adversity tends to widen existing disparities. The Lord's chastisement of ordinary Israelites

exposes those latent tendencies to grab more than their fair share. It is frequently necessary to hold politicians, bureaucrats, the media, and other authorities accountable. But blaming 'the system,' 'the 225', 'fake news,' 'social media,' etc. is also a convenient way of evading our individual and collective responsibility.

We in Sri Lanka have experienced instances when governing structures crashed due to natural disasters like the 2004 Boxing Day Tsunami, or man-made crises like the Vanni IDP camps, or the foreign exchange crisis of 2022. We have witnessed the deeply encouraging sign of the church at work. Despite being a sporadically persecuted minority in many parts of the country, small church communities were able to mobilize their pastors' fellowships and home cell networks to organize the delivery of food and medical aid far more efficiently and accountably than state officials could. When shepherds fail, the flock needs to take care of each other and the neighbours around them. Jesus the Shepherd taught his flock to do that. Whenever the church has remembered its economic and social solidarities across political and racial divides, their witness to the gospel has shone brightly.

In times of global tensions and domestic pressures, when we are tempted to cancel each other due to our secondary differences, we need to call upon Jesus our Shepherd to hold us, his flock, together. We need to deal honestly with our frustrations and fears within relationships of trust. Jesus is our Shepherd, and we are the sheep of his pasture. He calls us to be safe in each other's presence and be raised to be good shepherds like him.

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As wide ranging as they are in content, the common theme running through this volume is the importance of Christian discipleship as integral (psycho-spiritual, theological, ethical, and missional) transformation. Cherian examines the distinctives of the Pentecostal experience in

theological education. Fernando highlights the contribution of the Wesleyan Methodist revival to discipleship in church life. Poobalan explores the potential pitfalls and portals for discipleship through the connectivity of digital space. Rubesh finds hope for the revitalisation of spiritual identity among Sri Lankan migrant worker and diaspora communities through his reflection on ancient Israel's experience of exile and diaspora. Somaratna offers insights into healing and recovery from traumatic loss as an aspect of discipleship in a Buddhist context through a comparative reading of the Buddhist story of Arahant Bhikkhuni Patāchārā and the Hebrew wisdom narrative of Job. All very valuable scholarly reflections for Sri Lankan church leaders, if they would care to read and benefit from them.

To conclude on a personal note, may I say how grateful I am for the privilege of co-editing and editing *JCTS* as a peer-reviewed journal from 2018. I pray that my successor will have more success in persuading the seminary's younger faculty and postgraduate alumni to commit the time and effort required to contribute to academic theological writing not only in English but also in Sinhala and Tamil. When *JCTS* becomes a trilingual journal it will better serve the Sri Lankan church, as our contributor Shari de Costa reminds us.

Prabo Mihindukulasuriya
Editor

THE PAṬĀCĀRĀ STORY AND THE BOOK OF JOB: SUFFERING AND RESILIENT FAITH IN BUDDHIST AND BIBLICAL TRANSFORMATION

G. P. V. SOMARATNA

***Abstract**: This article offers a comparative reading of the story of Paṭācārā in Buddhist scripture and the story of Job in the Bible to discover avenues for discipling individuals who have suffered deep trauma into a new spiritual identity within a Buddhist cultural context. Although both characters endured immense suffering, their stories teach resilience, wisdom, and faith within their respective traditions. Paṭācārā in a karmic Buddhist setting and Job in an Israelite monotheistic setting share several thematic similarities, particularly in their experiences of loss and mental struggle. The key difference is the Paṭācārā story's Buddhist focus on detachment and insight into the universality of suffering (dukkha), and the Job narrative's emphasis on faith in God's justice and ultimate restoration. Both narratives highlight the human experience of suffering and the transformative power of wisdom or faith in overcoming it, even contributing to mental health and personal growth.*

***Keywords**: Suffering, faith, resilience, sense of purpose*

1. Introduction

Paṭācārā in Buddhism and Job in the Bible are individuals who experienced traumatic loss and recovery within their respective philosophical or theological worldviews. Both stories are roughly contemporaneous, originating in the 6th century BC during the Judahite exile under the Babylonian Empire and the era of the sixteen North Indian oligarchic republics known as the Mahajanapadas.[1]

1. Baveru Jataka (No. 339), E.B. Cowell, *The Jātaka or Stories of the Buddha's Former Births.* Vol 3 (Cambridge: University Press, 1897), 83.

2. The consolations of Paṭācārā and Job

Paṭācārā was a notable female character in the early Pali canon of classical Buddhist literature.[2] According to the story, she became one of the outstanding female disciples of Gautama Buddha when she became a Bhikkhuni period following her period of grief. Reportedly, she became the foremost exponent of the *Vinaya*, the rules of Buddhist monastic discipline.

Her story is certainly one of the most memorable in Buddhist literature and most referenced in sermons and iconography, particularly in Theravāda Buddhist countries such as Sri Lanka, Thailand, Myanmar, Cambodia, and Laos. She is remembered for her dramatic transformation from deranged grief (when she had thrown off her clothes, roaming naked in the streets) until she met the Buddha and, ultimately, attained enlightened *arahatship*. She is also revered as one of the greatest elder nuns (*thērīs*) of the Buddha with the expert ability to expound the Vinaya.[3]

The Book of Job is one of the most notable pieces of biblical literature in that although it is the story of one man it is mostly a revelatory account of God's sovereignty. It explores some of the most profound existential questions humans ask about life within a theistic framework. While many readers grapple with the cause of Job's afflictions, the narrator reveals that suffering can strike even the righteous. God's purposes involving human tribulations are inscrutable.

Suffering is a significant concept in both Buddhism and Christianity, but each tradition interprets and addresses it differently. The lessons drawn from their stories reflect the distinct spiritual frameworks of Buddhism and Christianity. The stories of Paṭācārā and Job share several

Baveru is identified with Babylon. See, Thomas W. Rhys Davids, *Buddhist India* (Repr. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1993), 104. Rabbinic opinion is that Book of Job was composed range from the era of patriarchs to down to the Persian Period. See, Marvin H. Pope, *Job*, The Anchor Bible 15 (3. ed., New York: Doubleday, 1990), xxx.

2. *Angutta Nikaya*, 1.5.4.
3. *The Dhammapada*, vv. 113, 288, 289.

thematic similarities despite originating from different worldview traditions.

The Buddha taught that everything in the world is impermanent (*anicca*), which is why becoming attached to anything, even one's own life, is fundamentally futile. Sorrow is caused by not fully realizing this and feeling that something is wrong when loss occurs even though loss is inevitable in an impermanent world. Buddha refused to admit the existence of a Creator whether in the form of a force or a being. His teaching was based on the impersonal concepts of *samasara* and *karma.*

3. The story of Paṭācārā

The primary source of the Paṭācārā story is found in the *Therīgāthā* (Verses of the Elder Nuns) which celebrates her attainment of insight into suffering and impermanence (112-121).[4] The *Vinaya Piṭaka* mentions Paṭācārā as an expert in monastic discipline. The *Apadāna* (Legends of Female Disciples) offers additional historical and spiritual details.[5] The *Dhammapada* Commentary (*Dhammapadaṭṭhakathā*) provides a detailed background on her tragic life and conversion to Buddhism.

Paṭācārā was born in Sāvatthī[6] to a wealthy merchant family. At puberty her parents confined her within the household to ensure her chastity for marriage to a husband of high-status. However, she fell in love with a servant and decided to elope rather than accept an arranged marriage. She left behind her luxurious life, settled in the village of her husband, and bore her first son. This early episode of her life demonstrates her strong will and independence.

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4. Charles Hallisey, ed., *Therigatha: Poems of the First Buddhist Women*, Murty Classical Library of India 3 (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2015), 66–70

5. Caroline A F Rhys Davids, *Psalms of the Early Buddhists,* First Indian edition., MLBD Sacred Books of the Buddhist Series (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 2018).

6. Sāvatthī was the capital of the ancient kingdom of Kosala, near the Rapti river in north-eastern Uttar Pradesh, India. The Buddha lived most of his life there after enlightenment.

While pregnant with their second child, Paṭācārā insisted on returning to her parents in Sāvatthī for better care during childbirth. During their journey, her husband was bitten by a venomous snake and died. Society in 6th cent. India was regulated by the *Dharmashastra*'s social norms and emerging religious practices. The death of a husband had detrimental social, religious, and legal consequences for a widow.[7]

Paṭācārā gave birth to her second son on the journey, but tragedy struck again. A storm broke out, forcing her to cross a river in full flood. She carried her newborn across but while attempting return for her older child, the newborn was swooped away by a bird of prey. Hearing his mother's scrams mid-stream, the older son assumed she was calling him and entered the water only to be swept away in the strong current. Sons were considered essential for a family's well-being and spiritual continuity. The *Manusmriti* states that a woman is always under the guardianship of a male relative. "In childhood, a female must be subject to her father; in youth, to her husband; and when her lord is dead, to her sons. A woman must never be independent" (*Manusmriti* 5.148).[8] Therefore, the death of the male members of her family caused deep personal distress, especially as she blamed herself for their deaths.

Traumatised by the sudden and successive deaths of husband and children, Paṭācārā arrived at her parents' home, only to withness another calamity. The storm had destroyed the house, killing her parents and three brothers. Overwhelmed with grief, she lost all sense of propriety, wandering the streets naked and distraught, lamenting her woes. The duty of support and protection for a widowed daughter fell on the parents according to ancient Hindu norms. But Paṭācārā had lost her entire family and was utterly destitute. She wandered aimlessly until she met the

7. Manmatha Nath Dutt, *The Dharma Sāstra or the Hindu Law Codes, Vol. 1* (Kessinger Publishing, 2010).

8. G. Bühler, *The Laws of Manu* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1964), 195.

Buddha at the Jētavanā monastery in Sāvatthī.[9]

Seeing Paṭācārā's broken state, the Buddha addressed her compassionately and counselled her based on basic Buddhist principles. He taught her the doctrines of impermanence and suffering, helping her realize that grief arises from attachment. She renounced social attachments, joined the monastic order of nuns, and through meditation attained the tranquil mental state of sōtapatti. She later became a leading nun (*bhikkhuni*) and was renowned for her teachings on discipline (*vinaya*) and wisdom. According to Buddhist canonical writings, Paṭācārā's journey from immense personal loss to spiritual awakening is regarded as a powerful testament to the transformative power of the Buddha's teachings.

The Buddha never invoked the existence of a creator whether in the form of a force or a being. He interpreted the plight of Paṭācārā purely in karmic terms. According to the *Dhammapada*, Buddha said to her, "Throughout this round of samsāric existences, the amount of tears you have shed on account of the death of your sons, husbands, parents and brothers is voluminous; it is even more than the waters of the four oceans."

4. Modern phycological interpretations

Several modern psychological studies have mined the story of Paṭācārā for therapeutic lessons.[10] It has become a mainstay for trauma counselling within the subfield of Buddhist Psychology. In Sonali Deraniyagala's post-tsunami memoir, the protagonist recovers from severe mental trauma under the guidance of her therapist, a medical

9. Jētavanā was the venue of most of the Buddha's discourses, having resided there for nineteen out of 45 *vassas* (rainy seasons), more than at any other monastery.

10. E.g. P. Srivastava and M. Srivastava, "The Buddhist Perspective of Mental Health: Destigmatization and Relevance in Psychotherapy," *International Journal of Indian Psychology*, 12, no. 1 (2024): 1,628-1,634; Narotam Singh, D. Patteswari, and Amita Kapoor, "Buddhist Psychology and Mindfulness Interventions for Psychosis,"*Bodhi Path* 21, no. 2 (July 31, 2021): 9-14.

doctor with training in Buddhist psychology.[11] In a recent paper, Gamini E. A. Fonseka highlights "female resilience in the face of family tragedy" based on the Paṭācārā story. Female Resilience in the face of family tragedy; A comparative study of Sonali Deraniyagala's wave and the Buddhist tale of Bhikkhuni Paṭācārā." Considering the similarities and differences between their characters and circumstances, Fonseka makes a literary comparison of the two narratives that have evolved from their biographical details.[12] These accounts operate within the non-theist framework of philosophical Buddhism which does not require faith in a higher power. Human mindfulness, psychological resilience, and ultimate liberation are prescribed within the fundamental tenets of samsāric reality in accordance with the laws of unsatisfactoriness, non-being, impermanence, karma, rebirth, and the path of enlightenment.

5. Job's suffering within the theistic worldview

The biblical story of Job is based on a reality framed within a theistic worldview based on relational moral accountability between the sovereign God and his creatures who live in a world which is orderly yet vulnerable to evil. Belief in personal relationship with God can be deeply therapeutic. It provides comfort, guidance, and a sense of purpose, especially during challenging times. Many people find that faith helps them cope with stress, anxiety, and uncertainty, offering a source of inner peace and emotional resilience.

The story is about a righteous and wealthy man named Job who lives in Uz as the priest and patriarch of his

11. Sonali Deraniyagala, *Wave: Life and Memories after the Tsunami* (Westminster: Knopf Doubleday, 2013).

12. E. A. Gamini Fonseka, "Female Resilience in the Face of Family Tragedy: A Comparative Study of Sonali Deraniyagala's *Wave* and the Buddhist Tale of Bhikkhuni Patachara," in *Avenues: Papers on Peace, Reconciliation and Development Challenges, Proceedings of the 2nd International Conference on Humanities and Social Sciences. Faculty of Humanities & Social Sciences, University of Ruhuna, 2017*, 142–157.

extended family. God mentions Job to Satan saying, "there is none like him on the earth, a blameless and upright man, one who fears God and shuns evil" (Job 1:8 NKJV throughout). Despite his righteousness, Job experiences catastrophic losses, including the death of his children, the loss of his wealth, and severe physical afflictions. These trials are permitted by God as a test of Job's faith, instigated by Satan's challenge that Job's piety is solely due to the prosperity and protection with which God has favoured him. The book is part of ancient Israel's wisdom tradition and provides a profound exploration of God's interaction with Satan, human suffering, divine sovereignty, faith, and theistic discourse. Job at that time is unaware of the dialogue between God and Satan, and his response of faith is a testament to his faith in God despite his suffering and confusion.

Amidst devastating loss, Job's initial response is one of deep anguish and pious resignation. "Naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked I will return. The LORD gave, and the LORD has taken away. Blessed be the name of the LORD" (Job 1:21).

Next, Job is visited by friends—Eliphaz, Bildad, Zophar, and later Elihu, who attempt to explain his sufferings through the lens of divine punitive justice. They reason that Job's afflictions must necessarily be the result of his personal sin. Eliphaz suggests that Job's suffering is a form of divine discipline (Job 4:7-8). Bildad insists on the righteousness of God and urges Job to repent (Job 8:3-6). and Zophar frankly accuses Job of deserving an even bigger penalty (Job 11:6).

On the other hand, Job maintains his innocence and refuses to accept their simplistic reasoning. Throughout the discussions, Job expresses his agony and bewilderment, but he continually professes his connection with God. Job accuses his companions of being "miserable comforters" (Job 16:2) and challenged their formulaic cause-effect theology.

The story of Job inspires individuals to remain steadfast and find hope even in the most devastating

circumstances. In the face of suffering, we are reminded of our creaturely vulnerability, mortality, and intellectual limitations – hard but undeniable realities of our human existence. This realization can be a humbling experience, leading us to embrace our inherent need for God. When everything is going well, it is easy to forget our reliance on God. One may even be tempted to believe in one's self-sufficiency.

Job's answer to his wife's statement, "Do you still retain your integrity? Curse God and die!" was "You speak as a foolish woman speaks…should we accept from God only good and not adversity?" (Job 2: 9-10). Job shows that faith is not certainty, but an openness to mystery sustained by a trustworthy God. Faith is trust that a greater power is guiding us. It may not erase doubt, but it helps us to live with it.

Eventually, God vindicates Job's innocence and honour, restoring to him double the wealth he had lost, and replenishing his progeny. Job's response of faith is rewarded, not merely with material blessings, but with a deeper understanding of God's character and purposes. His account serves as an enduring example of faith that perseveres through trials, trusting in God's goodness and sovereignty.

6. Faith-like *saddhā* in Paṭācārā's transformation

While Buddhism does not posit a sovereign creator deity, there is a sense of *dhamma* (liberating truth) as a guaranteeing and guiding principle of moral justice and order. The Buddha represents wisdom, but he is not a divine being who intervenes to supernaturally eradicate suffering. Paṭācārā's transformation came from understanding *dhamma*, not divine intervention, but through the compassionate intervention of the Buddha. Buddhism teaches self-mastery for achieving mindfulness and enlightenment. While successive Buddhas provide guidance, the effort and realization must come from human resolution. Paṭācārā's suffering was due to impermanence

and karmic conditions, not divine punishment. Buddha's words initiated her awakening. She was able to see her reality clearly, but she had to walk the path herself. Through meditation she found inner peace. From a Christian perspective, Paṭācārā's transformation is entirely psychological and self-directed. She does receive external intervention from the Buddha, but it is entirely therapeutic, not spiritual in the relational theistic sense.

The closest Buddhist concept to theistic 'faith' in Buddhism is *saddhā* which refers to a serene commitment to the practice of the Buddha's teaching, and to trust in enlightened or highly developed beings, such as Buddhas or bodhisattvas. *Saddhā* may not only be devotion to a person but trust in the efficacy of *dhamma* and the possibility of *nirvāna*.[13] On the other hand, through faith-based practices like prayer, repentance, forgiveness, and reconciliation, Christians have been able to experience deep healing in all areas of their lives. Although philosophical Theravāda Buddhism does not allow a personal role to the Buddha as the one who reveals truths, aids spiritual progress, or answers prayers after his *parinirvāna* (passing away), there are many instances when such faith was placed in him during his lifetime after attaining Buddhahood. Therefore, even in contemporary Buddhist devotion, the Buddha is prayed to as an ever-present being who attends to the supplications of his adherents. As the astute observer of Sinhala folk Buddhism, Gananath Obeyesekera points out, in Theravada Buddhism, the Buddha is personalized but projected into a past.[14]

When Paṭācārā first approached the Buddha in her disturbed state, he assured her with his authority, inviting her to place her faith in him. "Patacara, have no fear; you have now come to one who can protect you and guide you." After Paṭācārā had become a nun, the Buddha appeared

13. *Saddha Sutta*, translated from the Pali by Thanissaro Bhikkhu, Aguttara Ninkaya 5.38 PTS: A iii 42, 1998.

14. Gananath Obeyesekere, "The Great Tradition and the Little in the Perspective of Sinhalese Buddhism," *The Journal of Asian Studies* 22, no. 2 (February 1963): 143, https://doi.org/10.2307/2050008.

to her once again to confirm insights and aid her progress to arahathood. On that occasion, “the Buddha seeing her through supernormal power from the Jetavana monastery sent forth his radiance and appeared to her in person. He then said to her, ‘Patacara, you are now on the right track, and you now have the true perception of the aggregates (khandhas)’.”

7. Conclusion

In Paṭācārā's story, the will to dedicate her life to cultivating spiritual progress as a nun and offer her leadership in the monastic community was inspired by realizing the teachings of the Buddha about impermanence and non-attachment. But it was also accompanied by faith in the compassion and authority of the Buddha as the ultimate teacher of liberative truth. Therefore, a form of faith did play a decisive role in Paṭācārā’s transformation.

Human suffering is a curious thing. We can recall our suffering, and, with a certain amount of anxiety, look onward to the future. We write about our sufferings, and those of others, so we participate vicariously in what others have gone through. This could give us pleasure or pain, or even a tantalizing mixture of both. In Christianity, "salvific suffering" refers to the confidence that suffering, when unified with Christ's suffering, can be a means of spiritual growth and even salvation. It is not that suffering is inherently good, but that through faith and by offering one's pain to God, it can lead to a deeper relationship with Him and a deeper understanding of the Christian faith.

Christians have two significant advantages. They have a relationship with a living being whose basic nature is love. They also have faith in this God. Faith is not a philosophy, but an encounter with the Lord. Knowing that we depend fully on the Lord and His grace is basic to faith.

Do those who have faith in God have a stronger sense of purpose to persevere through suffering? Christians would certainly claim it does, often citing Job as the clearest witness to that virtue of faithful resilience in the Bible.

DIASPORA DISTINCTIVES: EXPERIENCES OF DISPERSION, IDENTITY, AND REVITALIZATION IN OLD TESTAMENT ISRAEL

TED RUBESH

Abstract: *Drawing on the Old Testament as an authentic source of Jewish cultural memory and the analytical scholarship of Diaspora Studies, this article spotlights and compares the prominent characteristics of the ancient Israelite diasporic experiences in Egypt, Babylon, and Persia. These experiences are reflected upon from a missional perspective to understand contemporary diasporic experiences of people groups across the globe. Most relevantly, these themes are applied to the modern Sri Lankan diaspora, especially that of Sri Lankan migrant workers in the Persian Gulf.*

Keywords: *Ancient Israelite diasporas, natal identity, natal land, national revitalisation*

1. Introduction

The Israelite experience of diaspora (Latin for dispersion) in the Bible coalesces around two seminal events of mass displacement. At the beginning of their founding narrative, the Hebrew people emerge as the Israelite nation out of the sojourn of their patriarchal clans in Egypt where they had been enslaved. At the close of the Hebrew Scriptures, the Israelites and Judahites (Jews) either return from their homeland from exile in the Babylonian Empire or remain as a network of Jewish communities in the Persian Empire which has granted them freedom to remain or return.[1] The two experiences at each end of the

1. The term 'Hebrew(s)' is most commonly used as a clan name for the descendants of Abraham and Sarah in the early patriarchal narratives of Genesis and Exodus. After the exodus and conquest, the twelve tribes

OT story serve as bookends to the Jewish national narrative. While there is considerable debate about the precise meaning and content of the word *diaspora* as it is currently used, I will follow Robin Cohen's definition as communities with shared identities such as "language, religion, custom or folklore", that "have settled outside their natal (or imagined natal) territories", and that maintain some sort of loyalty and emotional links with "the old country." [2]

The study of diasporas, like the study of many other historical phenomena, often begins by building on archetypes or progenitors. The experience of the ancient Jewish diaspora described in the Hebrew Bible provides a foundational model for diasporic study. Daniel and Jonathan Boyarin go so far as to say that "Diaspora ... may be the most important contribution that Judaism has to make to the world ... ."[3] The diasporic landscape of course, is today as wide as the horizon, the word itself being a cipher for scattered communities of many different nationalities and ethnicities.

The study of Israelite diaspora usually commences with the captivity of the northern Israelite population by the Assyrian kings Tiglath-Pileser III and Shalmaneser V in the eighth century BC and the deportation of the southern Judahite inhabitants by the Babylonian King Nebuchadnezzar in the later part of the sixth century BC.[4] The exiles of Israel and Judah were relocated in several settlements across these empires as labour communities (1 Chron. 5:26; 2 Kings 17:6; Ezek. 1:3; Ezra 8:15, 17, etc.). In his definition of diaspora, Cohen's first criteria is of

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are called 'Israel/Israelites' after their common ancestor Israel, the name given to Jacob. When the united monarchy under David and Solomon separates into the northern kingdom of Israel and the southern kingdom of Judah, the designation 'Israelite' becomes specific to the northern populace and southern tribes are designated 'Judahite(s)' or 'Jews/Jewish'.

2. Robin Cohen, *Global Diasporas: An Introduction* (Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press, 1997), ix.

3. Daniel and Jonathan Boyarin, "Generation and the Ground of Diaspora" in *Theorizing Diaspora: A Reader*, edited by Jana E. Braziel and Anita Mannur (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2003), 110.

4. Cohen, *Global Diasporas*, 3.

a community that has experienced "dispersal from an original homeland…to *two or more* foreign regions."[5] In this case, the sojourn of the Hebrews in Egypt from the time of Joseph to the Exodus would not constitute a true diaspora. However, given the Hebrew community's tribal cohesion and alienness in Egypt, its strong sense of Canaan as natal land, and the later references to return from exile as a new exodus qualifies their Egyptian 'disaporic' experience as a worthy of comparison.

2. The Jewish Diasporic Experience in Egypt

From Israel's experience in Egypt seven elements of diasporic significance emerge that seem well reflected in the experience of many diasporas today.

2.1. The foundation of an incipient national identity

Scattered people are not necessarily a diaspora unless they perceive themselves to be at least marginally bound to each other by such affinities. All true diasporas have their roots in at least an incipient shared identity, whether that is linguistic, religious or ethnic. As Cohen reminds us, "the idea of a shared origin … is a common feature of diasporas", and "acts to 'root' a diasporic consciousness and give it legitimacy."[6] From the recurring invocation of their rudimentary beliefs in El/Elohim, the high god who hand bound himself in covenant promise to their ancestors Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, the Hebrews evidently drew a sense of tribal kinship tied to a ancestral theology.

2.2. The impetus of a collective crisis

Cohen points to different centrifugal forces that cause the dispersal of peoples and proposes a typology of "victim, labor, trade, imperial and cultural diasporas," each representing a different cluster of motivations for types of

5. Ibid., 26. Italics mine.
6. Ibid., 184.

diasporas.[7] Genesis recounts that the Hebrews' sojourn in Egypt had been caused by a severe famine, which would make it a "victim diaspora" in In Cohen's typology. James Hoffmeir comments that "epigraphic and archaeological data clearly demonstrates that Egypt was frequented by the peoples of the Levant, especially as a result of climatic problems that resulted in drought…from the end of the Old Kingdom…through the Second Intermediate Period."[8]. Entering Egypt as refugees, the Hebrew community was at the mercy of its Egyptian neighbours and the vicissitudes of the pharaonic state.

2.3. The influence of powerful advocacy.

Fortunately for the Hebrew community in ancient Egypt, vulnerability and weakness were balanced at least twice by the considerable intervention and support of two powerful advocates. The first was Joseph, whose advocacy served the community at the time of their arrival in Egypt. The second was Moses whose advocacy engineered their departure from the land some four centuries later.

It is interesting to note that both men rose and addressed the needs of the Hebrew diaspora in hours of its greatest vulnerability. The key to such a diaspora's survival will often rest in the hands of those who pursue their advocacy. When Joseph's 'poor relatives' sought refuge in Egypt, they had the inestimable advantage of having an advocate serving in the host nation's second-most powerful public office. With Joseph's influence, the transition from settled community in Canaan to diaspora community in Egypt was made infinitely easier. The community in fact thrived and multiplied (Exodus 1:7). What is clear is that this surely could not have happened without the timely and discerning advocacy of Joseph.

Like Joseph, Moses was himself a Hebrew by birth but through extraordinary circumstances had become a

7. Ibid., 21.

8. James Hoffmeir, *Israel in Egypt: The Evidence for the Authenticity of the Exodus Tradition* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 68.

privileged member of the Egyptian court and used his royal connections to the advantage of his kinfolk. Wherever diasporas have appeared, their ability to cope and often thrive has been in large part due to those who carry influence and weight in the corridors of power in their host countries and are willing to use these advantages to serve their communities.

2.4. The legacy of negative historical associations

When a particular diaspora begins to take root in a host nation, it brings with it a package of associations and linkages that are often unintentional and can be detrimental to its role as a minority within the mainstream culture. The Hebrew diaspora in Egypt were compelled to face the fallout of the xenophobia resulting from the Hyksos interregnum of about 150 years during which an aggressive Semitic peoples invaded and ruled much of Egypt.[9] The Hyksos usurpation was deeply resented and eventually driven out by Ahmose in 1570 BC, who founded Egypt's 18th Dynasty and the New Kingdom era.[10]

The shared Semitic origin of the Hyksos invaders and the Hebrew diaspora, both of whom arguably made Egypt their home for a limited but overlapping period of time.[11] Semitic culture was in many ways vastly different to that of Egypt. The inherent tensions between the two cultures can be clearly seen in the latter part of the Joseph narratives in Genesis where differences of language, vocation and personal grooming are specifically mentioned (Genesis 42:23; 43:32; 46:34).[12]

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9. John Bright, *A History of Israel* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1981), 59-61. See also S. David Sperling, "Hyksos," *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, 2008, Jewish Virtual Library. http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/judaica/ejud_0002_0009_0_09361.html (Accessed March 20, 2025).

10. Eugene H. Merrill, Merrill, *Kingdom of Priests: A History of Old Testament Israel* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 199^), 54-55.

11. James Hoffmeier, "What is the Biblical Date for the Exodus? A Response to Bryant Wood," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 50, no. 2 (June 2007): 68.

12. For a brief discussion on the interface between Egyptian and Semitic culture, see K.A. Kitchen, "Egypt, Egyptians," *Dictionary of the Old*

It is possible that the Hebrews enjoyed greater favour under the Hyksos usurpers because of their shared Semitic culture. If this is so, the ejection of the Hyksos and the reassertion of native Egyptian power would have placed a burden on the Hebrews.[13] Egyptian concerns that the Hebrew population was increasing and could become a dangerous "fifth column" threatening Egyptian security (Exodus 1:9-10).

Diaspora communities with connections to the host nation's rivals would always come under suspicion of disloyalty and could easily be scapegoated in times of national crisis.

2.5 The experience of marginalization and exploitation

As a means of keeping the growing Hebrews in check, they were reduced to slave labor by the Egyptian authorities and set to work in the construction of public works projects. When this failed, a policy of male infanticide was put into place with the obvious intention that Hebrew women would be forced to marry into the local Egyptian population and thus achieve a *de facto* assimilation (Exodus 1:15-22).

Physical and economic exploitation such as the Hebrews experienced in Egypt is easily attested to in the growing world of the diaspora today. Whether they are under-paid Mexican migrant workers in the U.S., or sexually exploited Filipina house maids in the Middle East, physical abuse and political and economic exploitation have often been hallmarks of the diaspora experience.

2.6 The inheritance of shared diasporic memory

Cohen's introduction to the subject of global diasporas seeks to modify earlier attempts by Safran to delineate a set of features that give a measured definition

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Testament: Pentateuch (Downers Grove IL: IVP, 2003), 209.

13. According to John Walton it has been common to understand the relationship of the Israelites to the Hyksos in this way. See J.H. Walton, "Date of Exodus," *Dictionary of the Old Testament: Pentateuch,* 263.

to the term diaspora.[14] Among his modifications of Safran's characterization of diasporas, he includes the corporate experience of a single formative and catalytic event. Cohen states that "dispersal from an original centre is often accompanied by the memory of a single traumatic event that provides the folk memory of the great historic injustice that binds the group together."[15]

This implies that part of what binds a scattered group together is the corporate memory of a shared negative experience. Cohen limits this to a "single traumatic event." The Hebrew experience in Egypt however would suggest that the binding power of a negative experience can be much broader than a single event. While their initial transition from settled community to diaspora community was brought on by a famine that was traumatic enough, it was in fact the lengthy experience of shared misery and exploitation over many years that fixed itself particularly in the collective memory.

Significantly, neither were the experiences simply preserved in an informal folk memory. According to Gerhard Von Rad, the collective diasporic memories were safeguarded in Israel's cultic confessions.[16] Her diasporic roots were to be rehearsed and remembered (cf. Deuteronomy 26:5-8). Further, the Exodus narrative itself attests to a *documentary* recording of the events, and not simply an oral tradition. It is interesting that the legal code which eventually emerged as Israel's "constitution", specifically enjoined the Israelites of later days not to forget that they had once been "aliens in the land of Egypt" (Leviticus 19:34) and "slaves to Pharaoh in Egypt" (Deuteronomy 6:21). Once the Hebrews were permanently settled in Canaan, the Levitical code concerning the Hebrew management of debt and personal property frequently based its appeal on remembering the fact that the Hebrews

14. See W. Safran, "Diasporas in Modern Societies: Myths of Homeland and Return," *Diaspora* 1, no. 1 (1991): 83-99.

15. Cohen, *Global Diasporas*, 23.

16. Gerhard von Rad, *The Problem of the Hexateuch and Other Essays* (London: Oliver and Boyd, 1966), 1-78.

had been "brought out from the land of Egypt" (cf. Leviticus 25:36, 38, 42, 55).[17] The memory of having been an exploited diaspora was to be rehearsed and never forgotten.

What is of particular interest in the case of the Hebrew experience in Egypt is the specifically stated purpose for what might seem to be an unnecessarily morbid rehearsal of the past. The repeated call to remember the painful diasporic past clearly had in mind a constructive and positivist future. The shared memory was *not* to serve as a nursery for fostered feelings of bitterness, revenge or retribution, but as a motivation for the ethical and just treatment of the alien communities the Hebrews were to one day find living as minorities in their own midst (cf. Exodus 22:21; 23:9; Deuteronomy 15:15). As Wright observes, "the treatment of aliens within their own (Hebrew) society…was to be marked with compassion, born of the memory of Egypt where it had been denied to themselves."[18]

2.7 Abiding historical and theological links to natal land

The account of the Jewish experience in Egypt suggests yet one more element characteristic to many diasporas. Students of the diaspora phenomenon such as Cohen and Safran inevitably include in their lists of pan-diasporic features a "collective memory and myth about the homeland, including its location, history and achievements" and "an idealization of the putative ancestral home and a collective commitment to its maintenance, restoration, safety and prosperity, even to its creation." [19]

Put simply, all diasporas acknowledge the idea of "the old country", the conception of a linkage, actual or perceived, to a natal land that lays some claim on the community's loyalty and emotions. Perhaps no diaspora in history so clearly demonstrates this as does the Jewish diaspora. The association of the Jewish people with

17. Christopher Wright. *Living As the People of God: The Relevance of Old Testament Ethics* (Leicester: Intervarsity Press, 1992), 83.
18. Ibid., 179.
19. Cohen, *Global Diasporas*, 26.

the "promised land" of Canaan is not only the engine behind the modern Zionist movement and the creation of the secular State of Israel, but also an association that traces itself back to the very origins of the Hebrews as an identifiable community.

What was and is true of the Jewish community continues to be true for many diaspora communities around the world today. Whether they are Lebanese in Australia or Sri Lankan Tamils in Toronto, the shared sense of autochthony and natal land continues to play an important part in shaping the self-perceptions of scattered communities abroad. The claims and counterclaims to natal land are part of the diasporic landscape, a landscape often tragically transformed into vicious battlegrounds, and must be taken seriously in addressing the problems and challenges faced by emerging diasporas today.

3. The Jewish Diaspora Experience in Babylon and Persia

Following their dramatic exit from Egypt recorded in the Book of Exodus, the Hebrews eventually settled in Canaan. For the next one thousand years, the Israelite nation established itself in the land, eventually becoming a monarchy. With the advent of Solomon's son Rehoboam, the Israelite kingdom was tragically split into two with the secession of ten of the original twelve tribes. The political map now comprised of two sibling nations, the ten seceding tribes making up the northern Kingdom of Israel, and the tribes of Judah and Benjamin making up the southern Kingdom of Judah and centering itself around the Davidic capital of Jerusalem. In a world shaped by voracious imperialistic appetites, the viability of the two small Jewish kingdoms was inevitably threatened and brought to the brink of extinction. In 722 B.C. the northern kingdom was decimated by an Assyrian juggernaut and its population forcibly marched off to the hinterlands of the Assyrian empire.[20] Some 130 years later in 586 BC it was the turn of the southern kingdom of Judah to see its glorious temple

20. Bright, *History*, 275. See also Merrill, *Kingdom*, 398.

and its capital in Jerusalem destroyed by the surging Chaldeans, its population dragged off in chains to Babylon.[21]

The exiled populations of the northern kingdom were largely assimilated to their (enforced) host cultures and eventually lost their identity as a unique and discernible people.[22] However, the trajectory of the Judahite population of the southern kingdom of Judah was significantly different than that of its northern neighbor. Not only was its Jewish identity and distinctiveness preserved but it also flourished and spread.[23] With the destruction of Jerusalem in 586 B.C., and the deportation of the bulk of its population to Babylon, the Judahite kingdom ceased to exist. Jewish life and identity now largely rested in the hands of the diaspora transplanted in the heart of the Babylonian empire.[24]

Here, unlike their deported northern neighbours a century or more earlier, the Judahite diaspora grew and flourished. Over the course of the next several hundred years they staged what was in fact nothing less than a most remarkable comeback, multiplying in numbers and influence across the ancient Near East and the Mediterranean world. Indeed, such was the increase that it is estimated that by the time of Christ, 7% of the Roman

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21. Merrill, *Kingdom*, 453.

22. Bright, *History*, 275. See also R.L. Hubbard Jr., "History of the People of Israel"*, The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia, Vol.2* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1982), 917. Some of the northern Israelite population were resettled by the Assyrians in the Babylonian regions where they may have been more likely to retain much of their Israelite identity. They may have served as precursors to the Jewish exiles from the southern Judahite kingdom brought to Babylon by Nebuchadnezzar after the Babylonians revolted against the Assyrians and established their own empire. See "The Babylonian Exile-1/Beginnings," *Theophyle's Biblical–ANE Blog* (The Divided Monarchy – 14/14 Epilogue, September 25, 2009) <http://theophyle.wordpress.com/2009/09/25/the-babylonian-exile-1-beginnings/> (Accessed March 20, 2025).

23. For a more detailed account of the historical experience of the Jewish exiles in Babylon as well as the Jewish communities scattered elsewhere after the destruction of Jerusalem in 587 BC, see Jill Middlemas, "Exile, Migration, and Diaspora After the Fall of Jerusalem in the Sixth Century BCE" in *The Biblical World, 2nd ed.,* edited by Katharine J. Dell (London: Routledge, 2021), 519-537.

24. Bright, *History*, 453.

Mediterranean world was said to have been Jewish.[25] Hedlund, quoting Harnack, concludes that the total Jewish population at this time "amounted to around four and one-half million at the beginning of the Christian era – one million each in Syria, Egypt, and Palestine, plus one and a half million in Asia Minor, Europe, and Africa."[26]

Whatever the precise details, it is clear that the Jewish diaspora in Babylon laid the foundations for a diasporic identity that would eventually grow in reach and impact far beyond its size and time. The question of interest is of course how this happened. In particular, what were the distinctive characteristics of the Jewish diaspora in Babylon that gave them the impetus to so energetically flourish and grow?

3.1 Diaspora distinctives of the Babylonian/Persian Exile

Two diasporic characteristics emerge uniquely from the period of Israel's Babylonian exile. As with the Egyptian captivity, these emerge from the narratives surrounding the time and find ready parallels in many subsequent diaspora experiences in history.

3.1.1 The credibility of healthy diaspora-host interaction

Tragic as the loss of Jerusalem and its centerpiece temple were to the Jewish community, the exiled diaspora's response to Babylonian overlordship was never one of disengagement and detachment. To the contrary, one finds in both the Biblical and secular records, plenty of evidence that the Jewish exiles wasted little time in becoming part of the fabric of the empire. [27] This was in fact, the implicit instruction of no less powerful a voice than the prophet Jeremiah. He had warned of Jerusalem's impending destruction for years, and then had been an eyewitness to it. Nevertheless, once the inevitable took place, he urged a

25. Roger Hedlund, *God and the Nations* (Delhi: ISPCK, 1997), 155.
26. Ibid.
27. Richard De Ridder, *Discipling the Nations* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1971), 66.

spirit of accommodation. To those exiles who may have been embittered by the experience, and to those who no doubt dreamed of a quick return home, Jeremiah gave instructions to settle, raise families and seek the welfare of their host nation (Jeremiah 29:4-7). Constructive long-term engagement with the host culture was to be the pattern. The ancient covenantal dictum that they had been called to be a blessing to the nations was to be as true for them as a *diaspora*, as it was for them as a settled nation.

No doubt the pace for this was set early on with the education and advancement of young Daniel and his associates in preparation for a lifetime of civil service in the Babylonian administration. The Biblical evidence, corroborated by occasional Babylonian records, testifies to a community that by and large adjusted remarkably well.[28] Cuneiform records of the time reveal Jewish names on Babylonian military rolls and business transactions.[29] There can be little doubt that the artisans and craftsmen brought over from Jerusalem were well employed in Babylon's many building projects.[30] The capacity of this transplanted community to flourish can be surmised from the fact that when given the opportunity to return to the natal land under Ezra many years later, the majority elected to stay in Babylon where life was undoubtedly more amenable.[31]

The Jewish experience in Babylon, and in the Persian empire that followed it, demonstrates that a diaspora community can work proactively within a host culture, engaging it in positive ways that do not compromise its essential identity.

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28. Merrill, *Kingdom*, 471.

29. The archive of the Murašû family's financial dealings with various clients (454-404 BC) include about eighty distinctively Israelite names. See chapter "Judeans in the Murašû Archive" in Tero Alstola, *Judeans in Babylonia: A Study of Deportees in the Sixth and Fifth Centuries BCE* (Leiden: Brill, 2020), 164-222.

30. Ely Emanuel Pilchik, *Judaism Outside the Holy Land: The Early Period* (New York: Bloch, 1964), 106.

31. Merrill, *Nation*, 473.

3.1.2 Revitalization of natal identity

The Jewish exiles in Babylon became Jewish Babylonians, proactively engaging in the socio-cultural milieu of their day. And yet, as we have pointed out above, they never divested themselves of their Jewish distinctiveness. While becoming Jewish *Babylonians*, they never lost their identity as Babylonian *Jews*.

Over the next few centuries, Babylon in fact became a major center of Jewish revival and revitalization. It is estimated that by the time of Christ, Babylon alone had a Jewish population numbering one million or more.[32] This is a remarkable achievement in light of the fact that the initial influx of Jews into Babylon at the time of the exile likely numbered no more than 36,000 to 48,000 men, women and children.[33] The simple fact is that while the formal "exile" was short in that it lasted some seventy years, as Paul Johnson puts it, "its creative force was overwhelming."[34] It was here that the institution of the synagogue first developed and flourished.[35] Jewish scholars and scribes developed a Babylonian Talmud and a Masoretic school that produced a corpus of invaluable biblical texts and manuscripts.[36] Babylonian centers of Judaism rivaled all others for generations.

The resurgence of the Jewish diaspora was remarkable, all the more so as Jewish identity had for hundreds of years been centered on a physical relationship to Jerusalem, and in particular to its glorious Solomonic

32. S.W. Baron, *A Social and Religious History of the Jews,* I, (New York: Columbia University, 1937) 132; Louis H. Feldman, *Judaism and Hellenism Reconsidered* (Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2006), 219.

33. Jewish Encyclopedia, *The Babylonian Captivity,* 2002. < http://www.bible-history.com/map_babylonian_captivity/map_of_the_deportation_of_judah_jewish_encyclopedia.html> (Accessed March 20, 2025).

34. Paul Johnson, *A History of the Jews* (New York: Harper and Row Publishers, 1987), 83.

35. De Ridder, *Discipling*, 77-79. Also see W.S. Lasor and T.C. Eskenazi, "Synagogue," *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia Vol.4* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1988), 677.

36. Pilchik, *Judaism*, 103ff. Also see Merrill, *Kingdom*, 481-482.

temple. With the destruction of both it is amazing that the diaspora community retained its faith, uniqueness and self perception at all, and indeed fostered its growth. The fact remains however that it did. As De Ridder states, "Israel threw off the vestment of her statehood together with her kingdom with remarkable ease and without apparent internal crisis."[37] Davies attributes the vitality of later diasporic Judaism to "its ability to detach loyalty from 'place', while nonetheless retaining 'place' in its memory, that enabled Pharisaism to transcend the loss of its land."[38]

The Jewish community it seems, displayed a remarkable propensity to adapt quite comfortably to its new surroundings. By Esther's time a hundred years later, Jewish communities had scattered over the length and breadth of the Persian empire, remaining a distinct and discernible identity wherever they settled (Esther 3:8). For better or for worse, the Jewish diaspora retained its core identity, being distinct enough that in any of the 127 provinces of the Persian empire, it could be recognized and marked out (c. Esther 3:13).

This dissociation of the Jewish diaspora from physical political hegemony over a natal space is, according to the Boyarins, a "lesson" that the Jewish experience of diaspora has to teach the diasporic milieu today, namely that "... peoples and land are not naturally and organically connected", and that "it is possible for a people to maintain its distinctive culture, its difference, without controlling land ...".[39] The relevance of this to the claims and counterclaims of any number of modern competing diasporic return movements are easily discernible.

37. De Ridder, *Discipling*, 76.

38. William D. Davies, *The Territorial Dimension of Judaism* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1982), 103.

39. Boyarin and Boyarin, "Generations," 110.

4. Factors Contributing to the Revitalization of Jewish Natal Identity in Babylon and Persia

4.1 The continuity of Jewish leadership structures

Nebuchadnezzar's battering rams had made short work of a Judahite national theology in which Yahweh's promises of a never-ending Davidic dynasty and Zion as its inviolable capital. Jerusalem's destruction and the deportation of the royal family did not, however, result in a leaderless Jewish rabble in Babylon. It is interesting to note that Jeremiah's letter to the community exiled in Babylon is addressed to "the elders of the exile, the priests, the prophets and all the people whom Nebuchadnezzar had taken into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon" (Jeremiah 29:1). Such clues suggest that leadership structures still functioned to some degree among the diaspora community in Babylon.

Even a semblance of the Jewish monarchy was to some degree retained. While Jehoiachin, the next to last king of independent Judah, had been marched off to Babylon together with his family in the second deportation, we are told that the Babylonian king eventually released him, put him on a royal stipend and afforded him royal recognition. (II Kings 25:27-30). In Babylonian tablets he is referred to as "King of Judah", and it is apparent that the Jewish community in Babylon continued to look on him as the rightful Judahite king in opposition to his uncle Zedekiah who had replaced him on the Judahite throne in Jerusalem's final years.[40]

Therefore, one of the reasons for the relative health and stability of the Jewish diaspora can be traced to the existence, operation and continuity of familiar Jewish institutions of leadership that provided a semblance of structure and stability for a community seeking to find its feet in a strange land.

40. Merrill, *Kingdom*, 452.

4.2 The influence of Jewish prophets

The prophetic message before the final fall of Jerusalem was generally very critical of a nation that had largely abandoned any genuine adherence to the covenant law of Moses. However, once the destruction of Jerusalem was complete and the bulk of the Jewish population were now exiles in a strange land, the tone of the prophetic message changed dramatically. The latter parts of both Isaiah's and Jeremiah's prophecies glow with hope for the future of God's chosen people. While these prophets were not physically present in Babylon, their words accompanied and consoled the people. As Bright says, "... their affirmation ... of the ultimate triumph of Yahweh's redemptive purpose provided men with a hope to which they could cling."[41] The prophets Ezekiel and Daniel were among the exiles and their words encouraged their fellow captives not to lose hope in God's plans for them in the years to come.

4.3 The example of Jewish statesmen and women

The iconic stories of Daniel and the lions' den; Shadrach, Meshech, Abednego and the fiery furnace; Queen Esther risking her life before the Persian king for her people, sustained ethnic and national pride. Such people gave to the diaspora living examples of loyal citizens of the empire who carried weight in high places, who in the same breath were unapologetically Jewish. What is sure is that as such stories are told and retold, the cohesiveness of a scattered people is strengthened and the shared associations revitalize and invigorate the community.

4.4 The power of renewed faith

Another primary reason for the growth and flowering of the Jewish diaspora at the beginning of the exile was the renewal of its commitment to the covenant. Fidelity to the covenant with Yahweh had been seriously compromised

41. Bright, *History*, 349.

through much of their history. According to the prophets, this was the very reason Yahweh had forsaken Jerusalem and allowed His covenant people to be driven from the land. The hiatus in Babylon however was never meant to be final. Its purpose was to discipline and restore. Its ultimate goal had always been the turning of the people's hearts back to their God in repentance.

In their initial years as a vulnerable diaspora, they rediscovered a fresh faith in God and His covenant law. Evidence for this is found in the fact that the Jews at this time became what one might call the first truly monotheistic people. Further evidence lies in the missionary efforts the Jewish diaspora engaged in as they continued to spread throughout the Near East and the Mediterranean world. De Ridder and Hedlund document the passion and energy of Jewish missions during the period between the OT and the NT and ascribe much of the astounding multiplication of Jewish populations at the time to this missionary activity.[42] A renewed sense of spiritual calling and purpose gripped their hearts, and put a disparate broken people on a fast track to rejuvenation.

4.5 The renewal and revitalization of ties to the natal land

By the end of the exilic period, the majority of Jews lived outside the 'promised land'. Diaspora was now the predominate expression of Jewish life. Interestingly however, the last chapter of the OT narrative was not a diaspora story. Though it was in fact a minority story, it was one in which the locus was once again the promised land.

In 538 BC, the first year of his reign in Babylon, Cyrus issued a decree mandating the re-establishment of the Jewish community and religion in Palestine.[43] Over the next one hundred years, the biblical narrative indicates that several waves of Jewish exiles took advantage of this

42. See Hedlund, *God and the Nations*; De Ridder, *Discipling*.

43. Bright, *History*, 361; D. Clines, "Cyrus," *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia, Vol.1* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1979), 847-848.

opportunity to return to the land of their fathers.[44] Under the leadership of men such as Zerubbabel, Ezra, and Nehemiah, the returnees were able to restore a semblance of Jewish life and religious practice in Jerusalem and its environs. From this reseeding of the natal land eventually grew the million-strong Jewish community that populated Palestine by the time of Christ.

Two observations arise in regard to the relationship of the 'return movement' and the diaspora that remained at large in the Persian empire. The first is that only a very small percentage of the Jewish diaspora actually returned to their native land.[45] This, as noted above, was no doubt due to the fact that life in the empire had brought the diaspora a fair measure of settled comfort. Life in the natal land on the other hand, had little to offer but the exhausting struggles of rebuilding on the ruins of a bygone era. Therefore, a return to the natal land simply did not generate widespread enthusiasm among the Jewish diaspora.

This however did not mean there was a radical 'disconnect' between the diaspora and its sense of natal land. Whether one chose to return or to stay, no Jew could ever deny his or her natal links to the land. "By the rivers of Babylon", the captive exiles had sung, "there we sat down and wept, when we remembered Zion" (Psalm 137:1) "If I forget you, O Jerusalem," they continued, "may my right hand forget her skill. May my tongue cling to the roof of my mouth if I do not remember you, if I do not exalt Jerusalem above my chief joy" (Psalm 137:5-6).

Despite threats to his life, Daniel's orientation to his natal land was expressed by physically facing Jerusalem three times a day in his prayers (Daniel 6:4-10). Clearly, neither the threat of death nor long years in exile had dimmed his attachment to Jerusalem as his true spiritual home. Sometime later, while noting that the seventy-year exile prophesied by Jeremiah is close to completion

44. Ezra and Nehemiah give passing descriptions of these returns. The post-exilic prophets Haggai, Zechariah and Malachi give additional background regarding the struggles the returnees faced.

45. Merrill, *Kingdom*, 493.

(Daniel 9:2), Daniel was stirred into a majestic prayer of confession on behalf of his people. In it he refers to "the land," "Jerusalem," "the inhabitants of Jerusalem," "your holy mountain," "your city Jerusalem," "your desolate sanctuary," and "the holy mountain of God" ten times in eighteen verses (9:3-20). After a lifetime among the exiled diaspora in Babylon, the natal land and its spiritual associations clearly remained the focus of his heart.

There can be no doubt that Daniel's attitude to his natal land was to some degree reflective of the attitude of the rest of the diaspora to their homeland. While it is true that the numbers of returnees to Palestine were small, the fact remains that under the leadership of men like Zerubbabel and Sheshbazaar, over 50,000 exiles did indeed make the journey back to Palestine, and rebuilt their lives on the ruins of Jerusalem and its environs. The vast majority of these returnees were Jewish exiles who had been born and raised in the diaspora and had likely never set eyes on the land of their forefathers. Yet they returned! A deeply held sense of shared natal roots energized them into a radical return to a homeland they would only be seeing for the first time.

Not only were the numbers of returnees *not* insignificant, they were indicative of a much larger diaspora community that would have been necessary to support and finance such a venture. Indeed, Ezra makes clear that financial support for the first wave of returnees under Zerubbabel not only came from the king's treasuries, but from the pockets of the diaspora. (Ezra 1:6) Clearly the vision of the natal land generated a momentum that continued in the years to come. In 458 BC, some eighty years after the first return, Ezra led a second return to Palestine.[46] Though much smaller in size, it is indicative of a continued interest among the Jewish diaspora in matters relating to Palestine. Roughly thirteen years later in 445 BC, it was the turn of Nehemiah to make his way to Jerusalem. The impetus that pushed him sprang from the same deep

46. Ibid., 502.

sense of identification with natal land that had so moved Daniel, Ezra and countless others (cf. Nehemiah 1:1-4). Once again there seems to be a strong thread of deep emotive identification with the natal land that neither time nor distance could remove.

The interplay between the Jewish diaspora and natal land that has been described above surfaces two dynamics that are worth pausing to note. The first is that the deep attachment of the Jewish diaspora to the concept of a natal land was a value that bound the scattered community together. This is underlined by the distinction many diaspora Jews made between 'exile' and simple 'dispersion'. In the mind of the Jewish diaspora, these were not synonymous terms. The Jews were not simply a people in dispersion. They were a people in exile. As Davies says,

> That Jews outside Palestine conceived of their existence not simply as a dispersion meant that, wherever they were, they were still bound symbolically, theologically as well as historically, to their home base, to Eretz Israel: they were not simply scattered. The Diaspora maintained the notion of its existence as *(an)* exile.[47]

Thus, as a people who perceived themselves a nation in 'exile' the land remained a viable, emotive and living issue. There was a fundamental orientation to the natal land that bound the dispersed men and women of Israel together. Shared linkage to a natal land is an affinity that continues to bind diasporas of all shapes and sizes together today. And the emotions and feelings that are generated in the hearts of scattered people who dream of ancient homelands, find their diasporic ancestors in the scattered Jewish communities of the Bible.

A second diasporic dynamic arises from the association of the global Jewish family in Biblical history to its natal land. It is noteworthy that the renewal and revitalization of Jewish life *in* the land came from the Jewish diaspora *outside* the land. It is clear from the accounts in

47. Davies, *Territorial*, 80. Italics mine.

Ezra, Nehemiah and the post-exilic prophets, that left to itself the replanted Jewish community struggled to maintain covenant uniqueness as the people of God. Spirits quickly flagged, and social and religious compromise rapidly became the *modus operandi*. It was from the heart of the *diaspora* that the challenge to covenant faithfulness in the land so often came to the rescue. It was not "insiders", but "outsiders" like Ezra and Nehemiah who brought renewal and recommitment to those who had resettled in the promised land.

Perhaps, in an age of increasing change and globalization, every nation wedded to its soil needs fresh air and new perspective from a diaspora from without, if it is to survive and thrive.[48] Thus it seems to have been in the OT history of Israel from beginning to end.

5. Diaspora Context of Sri Lanka

We have sought to understand the Jewish experience in the OT through a diasporic lens. From the accounts of the experience in Egypt and Babylon/Persia, seven salient characteristics have emerged that lent the diasporic community its cohesiveness and durability.

While these distinctives were lived out in a unique way by the ancient Jews, their experience was not just an historical anomaly. The patterns and experiences that emerged from their story have been reflected in the stories of diasporas ever since. This includes not only the peoples of Sri Lanka, but the growing communities of scattered Sri Lankans around the world. Struggling to cope with recurring cycles of economic, social and religious insecurity, Sri Lankans in large numbers have in recent years have sought solace and security beyond the shores of their island. Today they form an integral and distinctive

48. Illustrative of this point, Cohen says, "Although born in China, Sun Yixian (Sun Yat-sen) developed his political consciousness in Hong Kong and in the Chinese community in Hawaii. His Society for the Revival of China was a crucial instrument in the promotion of a modern Chinese nationalism." *Global*, 185.

piece of the global diaspora jigsaw puzzle, sharing together in the joys and sorrows, and the challenges, opportunities and distinctives that mold and shape many other diaspora communities. They also form an important part of the socio-economic patchwork that makes up modern Sri Lankan society, contributing significantly to the country's economy and ever-changing social culture.

While hard statistics are difficult to nail down, and by nature constantly in flux, it is estimated that over three million Sri Lankans now reside and work in host countries around the world.[49] The largest single component of this three-million-strong diaspora are made up of short or long term "guest workers" who have found employment in the region of the Persian Gulf. Following a pattern established since the mid-80's, recent statistical records of Sri Lankans leaving the island for employment abroad suggest that over 81% of Sri Lankan labour migrants find employment in the six nations of the Gulf Cooperation Council (the GCC) plus the neighboring states of Israel, Jordan, and Lebanon.[50] This suggests that the Sri Lankan diaspora community in the above specified region would number somewhere between 2 and 2.5 million, or between 8 and 10% of the natal population of the country.

How does all of this relate to our earlier exploration of the experience of the Hebrew diaspora in the OT? As noted above the patterns and experiences of the Hebrew diaspora of old are reflected in the patterns and experiences of diaspora populations throughout history. The present Sri Lankan diaspora, and in particular the vast bulk of that number who live and work in the Middle East are no exception. In numerous ways their experience of diaspora reflects the experience of the captive Hebrews in Egypt and the exiled Israelites in Babylon. From our study of

49. Office for Overseas Sri Lankan Affairs. https://oosla.lk/#:~:text=An%20estimated%20total%20of%203,host%20countries%20around%20the%20world., (Accessed March 20, 2025).

50. *Annual Statistics of Foreign Employment: 2023*, Sri Lanka Bureau of Foreign Employment. <https://www.slbfe.lk/wp-content/uploads/2024/10/sodapdf-converted-18_compressed.pdf> (Accessed March 24, 2025) (Subsequently cited as *ASRFE: 2023*).

these two periods of Jewish diasporic history a number of diasporic characteristics emerge that lend themselves to an understanding of the Sri Lankan presence and experience in the GCC.[51] Whether that is through the lens of the various "push and pull" factors that shaped each diaspora; whether it is through the challenges of marginalization and exploitation they both share; whether it is via the avenues of diaspora advocacy into which both have tapped; whether it is by means of positive host/diaspora interactions or through continuing links to the diasporic natal homeland from which they both draw, the affinities of the Sri Lankan diaspora in the Middle East to its OT ancestor are remarkable.

Remarkable, but not perhaps surprising, and this for both historical and theological reasons. Historically the Jewish diaspora has served as a catalyst and archetype for many diaspora studies, lending much of its ethos, vocabulary and imagery to the discussion. More importantly from the perspective of theology and mission, we have noted that God's redemptive concerns and engagement with the OT diaspora are reflected in His redemptive concerns and engagement with global diasporas and the general movement of peoples throughout history.

51. For a full discussion of the relationship and affinities of the Old Testament diaspora and the Sri Lankan diaspora in the Middle East, see Ted Rubesh, *Wandering Jews and Scattered Sri Lankans: Viewing Sri Lankans of the Gulf Cooperation Council through the Lens of the Old Testament Jewish Diaspora* (Portland, OR: Western Seminary, Institute of Diaspora Studies, 2014).

BILINGUALISM IN ACTS 21:37-22:2 AND LANGUAGE CHOICE IN MINISTRY

SHARI DE COSTA

Abstract: *This paper examines the cultural and linguistic implications of bilingualism in Acts 21:37-22:2 and its relevance to the Sri Lankan church. The article examines how Paul's strategic alternation between Greek and Aramaic in the same incident enables him to locate himself authentically vis-à-vis adversarial audiences. The paper draws parallels with Sri Lankan society where Christianity is perceived as a foreign religion and English language fluency as a mark of socioeconomic power. By examining Paul's example and its applicability, the paper encourages bilingual Sri Lankan Christians to be conscious of language choice and its implications in the life and ministry of the church.*

Keywords: *Bilingualism, code-switching, inclusivity*

1. Introduction

Language as a cultural marker of belonging or otherness has significant implications in postcolonial societies like Sri Lanka, where English is still considered an elite language of social demarcation. Since Christianity came to Sri Lanka on the wings of European colonialism, Christian nationals are commonly identified as perpetuators of a foreign culture.[1] The use of English in church worship and evangelisation, in contrast to the virtually exclusive use of vernacular languages in the religious activities of other faiths, further reinforces that perception. However, bilingualism or trilingualism (fluency in a combination of English, Sinhala or Tamil) is considered a highly desirable competency in Sri Lankan society. In Acts 21:37-22:2, Luke

1. G.P.V. Somaratna, *The Foreignness of the Christian Church in Sri Lanka* (Colombo: Colombo Theological Seminary, 2006), 5.

records a curious episode in which bilingualism plays an important role. Paul uses both Greek and Aramaic in a critical moment to his advantage. This article explores the cultural-linguistic significance of this episode in which the ability to speak both the vernacular language and the cosmopolitan 'lingua franca' is presented as advantageous to Paul's credibility in a situation where his Jewish/Hellenistic and imperial/indigenous loyalties are violently challenged. This article employs the sociolinguistic analytics of 'code-switching' to demonstrate how the choice of language functions in societies where they signal important ethnoreligious and sociopolitical self-identifications.

2. Cultural context of Acts 21:37 – 22:2

Acts narrates a cultural context marked by social and theological tensions. On one hand, Jesus is presented as the long-awaited Israelite Messiah his own people rejected.[2] On the other hand, he is embraced by non-Israelites who were considered outside the covenant community. The early church struggled with the confusion and controversy resulting from different factions trying to determine their identity in relation to Second Temple Judaism. Acts shows the early church grappling with the long-held Deuteronomic perspective that obedience and disobedience to the Torah entailed decisive consequences.[3] In response to threats against the sanctity of the temple and traditional Jewish culture under Hellenisation in the intertestamental period (c. 420 BC – AD 1) strict adherence to the Torah began to take center stage in Jewish religious life. Alexander the Great (c. 356 – 323 BC), who conquered the eastern Mediterranean region and the Persian Empire up to its Indian border, sort to promote the Greek way of life by introducing its culture through the establishment of Greek

2. Darrell L. Bock, *Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament: Luke 1:1-9:50* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1994), 14-15

3. Walter Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament: Testimony, Dispute, Advocacy* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997), 587-588.

style cities across his vast empire.[4] The Jewish response to Hellenisation consisted of varying degrees of assimilation, acculturation, and accommodation.[5] For the most part the two cultures coexisted with the Jews assimilating to a certain degree through adoption of Greek language and names. Improved conditions for travel within the Greek (and later Roman) Empires allowed the diaspora Jews to make pilgrimages for various festivals. Jewish males in the diaspora also made a practice of paying the temple tax after the temple was rebuilt by Herod the Great (c.72 – 4 BC).[6] Improved communication allowed the Jewish diaspora to remain connected with Jerusalem and the fortunes of their homeland.

Those who did not abandon the Jewish lifestyle altogether found that the observance of Torah gave them a sense of cohesion and preserved their distinctiveness as a group across the diaspora. They continued their strict adherence to Torah, including the rejection of idol worship, practicing circumcision, following dietary stipulations, and observance of the Sabbath. Diaspora Jews were more keenly aware that such practices protected them from being fully assimilated into the dominant Hellenistic culture in which they were a scattered minority. This may help us understand why it was the visiting diaspora Jews from the Province of Asia (mod. Türkiye), rather than local Palestinian Jews, who brought the charge of defiling the temple against Paul in Acts 21.[7]

Luke, to whom both tradition and scholarship attribute the authorship of Acts, was very probably an

4. David deSilva, *Introducing the Apocrypha. Introducing the Apocrypha: message, context, and significance*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2002), 45.

5. Ibid., 46-48

6. David deSilva, "Jews in the Diaspora," in The *World of the New Testament: Cultural, Social, and Historical Contexts* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2013), 276.

7. Scott A. Moreau, "Do the Right Thing – But Results are Not Guaranteed" in *Mission in Acts: Ancient Narratives in Contemporary Context*, edited by Robert L. Gallagher and Paul Hertig (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2004), 280.

educated Gentile with a good knowledge of the Septuagint (the Greek translation of the Hebrew Scriptures)[8] as attested by his frequent use of the OT in both his works.[9] As a Gentile affiliated with a still largely Jewish Christian movement, Luke would have understood well the tensions between Jews and Gentiles. It is not surprising, therefore, that he goes to great lengths to stress the inclusivity of Jesus' ministry by describing encounters with Roman authorities. These encounters include the Centurion whose faith Jesus marvels at (Lk 7:1-9) and another Centurion who acknowledges Jesus' righteousness at the foot of the cross (23:47).

3. Incident at the Jerusalem Temple (21:27 – 22:29)

On their arrival in Jerusalem, Paul and his companions (including Luke) are welcomed by James and the Torah-observing Jerusalem church but warned that the report circulating in the city alleged that Paul had been preaching that adhering to Torah was no longer obligatory for Jews who believed in Jesus and lived among the Gentiles (Acts 21:17-26). To counteract this false impression, James urges Paul to make a public demonstration of Torah observance by performing visible acts of piety along with four other men. The plan backfires when a group of diaspora Jews from the Roman province of Asia Minor notice Paul in the temple courts, restricted to Jewish men, and raise the alarm that he has brought in men whom they mistakenly assume to be Greeks (vv.27-29). In a crescendo of dramatic tension, Luke narrates how Paul is dragged away from the temple precinct which is shut behind him while the crowd of "rioters" (v. 32) proceed to beat Paul with intent to kill. He is saved by Roman guards who arrive to investigate why the "whole city was aroused" (v. 30).

8. Vernon K. Robbins, "The Socio-Rhetorical Role of Old Testament Scripture in Luke 4–19," in *Z Noveho Zakona /From the New Testament: Sbornik k narozeniam prof. ThDr. Zdenka Sazavy*, edited by Hana Tonzarova and Petr Melmuk (Praha: Vydala Cirkev ceskoslovenska husitska, 2001), 81.

9. Bock, *Luke*, 6.

The confusion of the mob is further highlighted by their inability to answer the commander as to who Paul is and what his crime is. Paul is then arrested but has to be carried to the barracks because the mob still attempts to lay their hands on him all the while demanding his death.

4. Paul's Bilingualism

Acts 21:37-22:2 is clearly intended to lead up to Paul's defense found in 22:3-22. Verses 21:37-22:2 tie the events of ch. 21 with the speech and events of ch. 22. Most major translations frame Acts 21:37-22:2 as a single unit.[10]

The events of 21:37-22:2 are somewhat puzzling and almost comical at first glance. Paul who is hoisted above by the angry crowd, speaks in Greek to the Roman commander, politely requesting a private word. The commander's surprise is expressed in his question, "Do you speak Greek?" He had assumed that Paul was an Egyptian brigand who had previously attempted a revolt in Jerusalem. Paul informs the commander saying, "I am a Jew, from Tarsus in Cilicia, a citizen of no ordinary city" (21:39). The conversation causes the readers to focus on the individuals while the shouts and violence of the mob rages around them. Paul's self-identification somehow seems to hold weight with the commander. It seems like he agrees to allow Paul to address the crowd entirely based on this one statement. Standing on the steps, Paul tries to silence the crowd. He then uses Aramaic to address them. He addresses the crowd as "Brothers and fathers," entreating them to hear his defense. Luke is careful to explain that "when they heard him speak to them in Aramaic, they became very quiet" (22:2).

Luke evidently attributes some importance to Paul's change of languages.

By speaking to the Roman commander in Greek and clarifying his identity Paul is distinguishing himself as a citizen of respectable stock.[11] The ability to speak a

10. E.g. NIV, NASB, NKJV, and NRSV.

11. Daniel K. Christensen, "Roman Citizenship as a Climactic

cosmopolitan language helped Paul gain favor with the person in authority and thereby succeeded in addressing the crowd.

Paul uses Aramaic to address the crowd. He begins with "fathers and brothers" traditional and respectful form of address, also used by Steven in (7:24).[12] Being addressed in their own mother tongue causes the agitated crowd to quiet and listen. For the second time, Paul's choice of language has enabled him to capture the attention of his intended audience. Paul's who has been accused of being a law breaker by the diaspora Jews is identifying himself with the Jews of Jerusalem by speaking in Aramaic.

5. Code-switching

The way in which Luke depicts Paul's use of language can be described as a form of code-switching, "the process of shifting from one linguistic code (a language or dialect) to another depending on the social context or conversational setting."[13] This term is normally applied to "the use of two or more languages in one speech exchange …between turns, within turns, and between constituents of single sentences,"[14] whereas Paul addresses one interlocutor in one language and the other in another. However, its function is comparable to that of Paul's language alternation. According to Benjamin Bailey, "Code-switching reflects sociohistorical meaning and boundaries, but it can also be used to negotiate and redefine them."[15] The commander's response reveals how language influenced his perception, shifting his view of Paul from that of a likely criminal to a person of standing worth hearing.[16] Code-switching here

Narrative Element: Paul's Roman Citizenship in Acts 16 and 22 Compared with Cicero's Against Verres," *Conversations With the Biblical World* 38 (2018): 69.

12. Ben Witherington, *The Acts of the Apostles*, Perlego. (Eerdmans, 1997), 668.

13. "Code-switching," *Encyclopaedia Britannica*. https://www.britannica.com/topic/code-switching.

14. Benjamin Bailey. "Switching" *Journal of Linguistic Anthropology* 9, no ½ (June 1999): 241

15. Ibid., 243.

16. Christensen, "Roman Citizenship as a Climactic Narrative

functioned to challenge the commander's prejudice and establish Paul's legitimacy as someone who could engage at a high intellectual and cultural level.

Paul, aware of the prejudices that existed in his society, uses language to circumvent these prejudices and achieve his ends. The use of Aramaic signalled cultural solidarity and respect for his Jewish heritage. Rather than appearing as an outsider catering to Greek-speaking elites, Paul positioned himself as one of them, someone who shared their language and concerns. Luke notes that the crowd fell silent when Paul spoke in Aramaic (Acts 22:2), indicating a suspension of hostility, at least temporarily. This reaction underscores the emotional and symbolic importance of language. Aramaic resonated as a marker of shared identity, subverting the mob's perception of Paul as a traitor to Jewish customs.[17] Paul's code-switching challenged biases on both sides. To the Romans, speaking Greek demonstrated competence and civility. To the Jews, speaking Aramaic reaffirmed his cultural roots and mitigated accusations of disloyalty. Each language choice exploited the assumptions of the audience to defuse tension and claim a hearing.

6. Application to Ministry in Sri Lanka

Sri Lanka's linguistic and cultural diversity mirrors the complexities of Paul's world. Christianity's association with colonialism has often fostered perceptions of it as foreign.[18] Regardless of denomination, there is a tendency for churches to gravitate toward Western practices or to remain insular subcultures. Overcoming this requires a deeper understanding of societal dynamics. Just as Paul navigated multilingual contexts with sensitivity, the Sri Lankan church must address its surrounding pluralism with humility and care.

Element," 70.

17. Witherington, *Acts of the Apostles*, 668.

18. Somaratne, *Foreignness*, 4.

6.1 The Value of Bilingualism

Paul's example highlights the importance of bilingualism in bridging cultural gaps. Sri Lankan churches, particularly in contexts involving rural and urban divides, can benefit from encouraging bilingual or trilingual ministry practices.[19] Language is relational. Even imperfect attempts at using someone's heart language can build trust and present the gospel more meaningfully. For example, teams from city churches who engage Tamil-speaking communities or rural Sinhalese audiences often witness a shift in receptivity when they communicate in the vernacular. Language use signifies effort, respect, and solidarity.[20]

6.2 Considerations for Language Use in Multilingual Contexts

Bilingualism is a powerful tool for engaging diverse groups with varying linguistic preferences and fostering connections across cultural divides. It can help address prejudice and break down stereotypes, as demonstrated by Paul's inclusive approach. However, multilingual communication also comes with challenges, such as unclear messaging or diluted communication, making it essential to assess the audience's primary language and cultural context for effective outreach.[21] Sensitivity to linguistic hierarchies and power dynamics is critical to avoid marginalisation or exclusion. Selecting the appropriate language requires careful consideration to prevent deepening divisions—relying solely on English, for example, may perpetuate

19. Michael Lessard-Clouston and Paul Switz, "Is English a Blessing or a Curse in Missions?," *Evangelical Missions Quarterly* 51 (2015): 394, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/282673175_Is_English_a_Blessing_or_a_Curse_in_Missions.

20. J. Haas, D. D. Walsh, and M. S. R. Marroquin, "Enhancing Cultural Competence in Counselor Education through Sociolinguistic Awareness," *Teaching and Supervision in Counseling* 6, no. 3 (n.d.).

21. Lessard-Clouston and Switz, "Is English a Blessing or a Curse," 399.

socio-economic disparities, while ignoring local languages risks alienating larger populations.[22] By adopting an inclusive and thoughtful approach, communicators can navigate these complexities and promote equitable engagement.

7. Conclusion

Paul's example in Acts 21:37-22:2 reveals the strategic potential of bilingualism in ministry. His ability to adapt to the linguistic and cultural contexts of his audiences was instrumental in creating opportunities for his message to be heard. For a multicultural, multilingual society like Sri Lanka, the implications are profound. Language choice in mission is not merely about communication but about relationship-building and bridging divides. By following Paul's example, the church can better proclaim its message of inclusion and redemption to a diverse world.

22. Ibid.

PENTECOSTAL–CHARISMATIC SPIRITUALITY AND THE SHAPING OF EVANGELICAL THEOLOGICAL EDUCATION[1]

JACOB CHERIAN

Abstract: *Beginning with a short account of the author's journey as an Evangelical–Pentecostal educator, the article outlines the global spread of the Pentecostal-Charismatic movement and describes four prominent features of Pentecostal–Charismatic spirituality. Drawing on Lesslie Newbigin and the apostle Paul, the article offers insights for theological educators involved in the spiritual and ministerial formation of missional practitioners in this Spirit-led movement within the evangelical church.*

Keywords: *Holy Spirit, Pentecostal-Charismatic movement, Evangelical movement, theological education*

> *"Spiritual formation has to do with living from the Spirit, being nourished by the Spirit, being attentive to the Spirit, being empowered by the Spirit for ministry."*[2]

1. My Journey as an Evangelical–Pentecostal Educator

Pentecostals share the evangelical tradition of offering personal testimonies. In that vein, and for purposes of full disclosure, I offer a brief description of my own spiritual, theological and ecclesiastical journey. I was born into a home where my parents were and remained faithful

1. This article has been adapted from a chapter originally published in *Leadership Development and Theological Education: A Festschrift for Graham Houghton*, edited by A. Varughese John and Havilah Dharamraj (Bangalore: SAIACS Press, 2023), 203-17.

2. Michael I. N. Dash, "Exploring Spiritual Formation in the Classroom," *Journal of the Interdenominational Theological Centre* 20:1/2 (1992/1993): 71. Dash was an African-American minister in the United Methodist Church who focused on the spiritual formation of parishioners and seminary students.

Christians and members of the Mar Thoma Syrian Church. Growing up in central India, I began attending an Anglican church. My teen years were spent in a fine Methodist church, where I also went through the traditional rite of confirmation. After a season of intense spiritual searching and personal experiences, I gravitated to a vibrant Pentecostal congregation, which also had a significant number of Christ–followers from different religious backgrounds.

The basic foundation of the Pentecostal experience was laid during the following couple of years. This included a passion for prayer, Bible study, and witnessing, and experiencing diverse Spirit-gifts such as speaking in tongues and prophecy. I was barely eighteen when I sensed a call to serve God in the ministry of the church. When I decided to go to a Bible College after my undergraduate studies, my pastor then did not see the need for formal theological training—which, unfortunately, is the case in some Pentecostal-Charismatic circles. However, he did provide a strong recommendation when I applied to SABC for my Bachelor of Divinity studies.

After my first theological degree at Southern Asia Bible College, and as my understanding of theology and Church grew—along with my respect for the beliefs and traditions of other churches and denominations—I became more comfortable to serve in almost any denominational or so-called nondenominational setting. I served briefly in youth and pastoral ministry in Methodist and Charismatic churches before I joined an Assemblies of God church in Bangalore. I joined the faculty at Southern Asia Bible College (now part of CGLD) in 1987, where I continue to serve.

My foundational formation, especially as a student and teacher of the New Testament, came about after being mentored by the distinguished New Testament scholar Gordon Fee,[3] probably the first one to be called

3. Gordon Fee taught for 6 weeks at SABC during 1992. Interacting with him and listening to his lectures were crucial to my decision to pursue NT studies. Later I studied under him, completing a ThM at

a "Pentecostal scholar"—which would have sounded like an oxymoron to some evangelicals. This four-decade faith journey, as a disciple and a theological educator in a Pentecostal institution, has shaped my views and convictions about Pentecostal–Charismatic Spirituality and theological education.

2. The Globalisation of Pentecostalism[4]

One evidence of the growing influence of Pentecostalism, both globally as well as nationally, is an openness among older denominations to listen to a voice from an earlier–neglected section of the Christian church. Pentecostalism, once viewed as an outlier, on the fringes of mainline denominations, is today increasingly recognized as an integral, or sometimes frontline, part.[5]

The Harvard theologian Harvey Cox predicted that the 21st century belongs not to the secularists but to the Pentecostals.[6] In an invaluable study of Protestantism, the Anglican theologian Alister McGrath writes about the spectacular growth of the Pentecostal–Charismatic movement:

> The charismatic movement is the most rapidly growing element of Christianity today. Pentecostalism in its various forms is now the largest single Christian group apart from Catholicism and outnumbers the sum total of all other forms of Protestantism.[7]

Regent College, Vancouver.

4. A collection of scholarly essays, edited by Murray Dempster, B.D. Klaus, and D. Peterson, *The Globalization of Pentecostalism: A Religion Made to Travel* (Irvine, CA: Regnum Books International, 1999), documents how the previous century was essentially the growth of Pentecostal-Charismatic Christianity.

5. Wonsuk Ma, "Pentecostalism: A New but Big Kid on the Global Christian Block," *Pentecostal Education* 7:1 (2022): 73–91.

6. Harvey Cox, *Fire from Heaven: The Rise of Pentecostal Spirituality and the Reshaping of Religion in the Twenty-First Century* (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley Publishing, 1995).

7. Alister E. McGrath, *Christianity's Dangerous Idea: The Protestant Revolution—A History from the Sixteenth Century to the Twenty-First* (New York: HarperCollins, 2007), 417.

While it is a challenge to account for such numbers on a global scale, McGrath mentions the number to be "at least half a billion in 2000" while in 2015 Todd Johnson et al estimate Pentecostals–Charismatics at 643 million.[8] Currently close to a fourth of the Christian Church could broadly be called Pentecostal–Charismatic. As a result, the movement has caught the attention of sociologists, theologians and church leaders who explore various facets of this widespread movement. Anyone seeking to understand the breadth and increasing diversities of the Pentecostal–Charismatic movement today would find an abundance of resources—using emic and etic approaches—which provide popular[9] as well as scholarly articles and books.[10]

While the birth of modern Pentecostalism is often traced to a few events in the United States, especially to the Azusa Street revival of 1906,[11] there is ample evidence for pre–20th-century Pentecostal experiences in other parts of the world. Interestingly, there is documented evidence of glossolalia (speaking in tongues) and other charismatic manifestations occurring in India between 1860 and 1910.[12] During 1860, in Tirunelveli, Tamil Nadu, there was a Pentecostal-like revival in the ministry of John Christian Aroolappen, an evangelist with the Church of England. This revival was totally unexpected and produced a mixed

8. Todd M. Johnson, Gina A. Zurlo, Albert W. Hickman, and Peter F. Crossing, "Christianity 2015: Religious Diversity and Personal Contact," *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 39:1 (2015): 28–29. See also Todd Johnson, "Counting Pentecostals Worldwide," *Pneuma* 36 (2014): 265–88.

9. Such as www.atlasofpentecostalism.net; www.worldchristiandatabase.org; and www.ag.org.

10. Two such resources would be Stanley M. Burgess & Eduard M. Van der Maas (eds), *The New International Dictionary of Pentecostal Charismatic Movements* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2002) and Allan H. Anderson, *An Introduction to Pentecostalism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014). One could also refer to journals such as *Pneuma*, *Journal of Pentecostal Theology*, *Asian Journal of Pentecostal Studies*, *Pentecostal Education*, and *PentecoStudies*.

11. Burgess & Van der Maas, *Dictionary of Pentecostal Charismatic Movements,* 344–49.

12. Ibid., 118–122.

response among the church leadership. Later in 1905, there were a variety of charismatic manifestations at Pandita Ramabai's Mukti Mission in Khedgaon, Maharastra.

In this article, I will turn my attention to aspects of Pentecostalism which capture its "spirituality" – even though a fuller understanding of PCS would also require a reasonable knowledge of the century–plus old history of the movement and its key theological emphases. Sometimes there is a need to differentiate (on theological and ecclesiastical grounds) between those who would properly be called Pentecostals, Charismatics, and Neo-Charismatics.[13] While Pentecostals generally hold to a post-conversion work of grace, in which the baptism in the Spirit is evidenced by speaking in tongues, Charismatics generally do not insist on this, even though there is often evidence and operation of glossolalia and other spiritual gifts among them. You can see the prevalence of the charismatic movement when significant leaders in episcopal denominations—such as archbishop Justin Welby and the eminent biblical scholar N. T. Wright—openly claim that speaking in tongues is integral to their prayer life. The largest single group of Charismatics is the 50-year Charismatic Renewal movement in the Roman Catholic Church in 230 countries—estimated at 160 million in 2013.

Ecclesiastically, Pentecostals are part of classical Pentecostal denominations (such as Assemblies of God, Indian Pentecostal Church, and The Foursquare Gospel Church), while Charismatics are those who are connected to mainline denominations (such as those within the Roman Catholic, Episcopalian and Presbyterian Churches). Neo-Charismatic is a broad category for an ever-increasing number of churches and groups who cannot be easily classified as either Pentecostal or Charismatic.[14] One earlier estimation put them at more than 18,000. These churches are usually independent, post-denominational, and often indigenous (such as the Vineyard Christian Fellowship, a majority of the Chinese house–churches, and thousands

13. Ibid., xvii–xxii.
14. Ibid., xx.

of groups in Latin America). In some places in India these groups are referred to as new–generation churches to distinguish them from traditional Pentecostal churches. In this article the term Pentecostal–Charismatic in PCS applies to this diverse family of churches and movements, including those in the Neo-Charismatic churches.

3. Prominent Features of a Pentecostal–Charismatic Spirituality[15]

To describe PCS is rather challenging, simply because of the vast diversities in history, organization, and practices of the large family of Pentecostal–Charismatic groups. One also struggles with the wideness as well as vagueness of the term "spirituality," especially when applied to such diverse movements. Russell Spittler explains that most Pentecostals would rather use the adjective *spiritual* than the abstract noun *spirituality*.[16] Nevertheless, at the risk of oversimplification or of flattening out a few unique features, I identify a set of four prominent features of PCS. Pentecostal–Charismatic groups generally value these aspects, seeking to experience them in greater measure. They are often comfortable with being considered part of the larger family of Evangelicals, even while differing with them on a few emphases.

3.1. A present and personal experience of the Spirit

While accepting the foundational tenets of Protestant theology, Pentecostalism—as the very designation suggests—holds on to one significant addition. While traditional Christian theology considers the experience of the hundred and twenty believers gathered in the upper-room on the day of Pentecost (as described in Acts 2) as

15. I have drawn substantially from my article entitled "Pentecostal-Charismatic Spirituality" in *Spirituality: Toward a Comprehensive Perspective,* edited by Mohan Larbeer and S Patro (Bangalore: BTESSC, 2016), 68–81.

16. Russel P. Spittler, "Pentecostal and Charismatic Spirituality," in Burgess & Van der Maas, *Dictionary of Pentecostal Charismatic Movements*, 1096.

an experience unique to the apostolic age, Pentecostals believe that this experience of being filled with the Holy Spirit (often referred to as the baptism in the Holy Spirit) and speaking in tongues is not limited to the apostolic age. Pentecostal–Charismatic believers seek to experience a similar infilling of the Spirit—living, as they believe, in the last days which began on that day of Pentecost. They hold to the reality, as does Paul, that the whole new covenant reality has been ordered under the aegis of the Holy Spirit.[17] They readily see an eschatological intensification at the foundation of a vibrant PCS: God's presence in and through the Holy Spirit abiding with believers, often coupled with a sincere belief in an imminent Parousia.[18]

Pentecostals emphasise the need to be filled with the Holy Spirit (from passages such as Acts 2:38–39; 4:31; Rom 8:1–17, 26–27; Gal 5:16–26; Eph 5:18) so as to live the Christian life, grow into maturity, and bear witness to Christ. Pentecostal–Charismatic believers "emphasise the present work of the Spirit through gifts in the life of the individual and the church."[19] However, one must add that, today this emphasis is no longer unique to Pentecostals and Charismatics.

The significance of this emphasis needs to be viewed in the contrasting context of Cessationism—the dominant belief held by Protestantism till the end of the 19th century, that the work of the Spirit as described in such texts as Acts 2 and 10 was limited to the apostolic age and had ceased thereafter. Therefore, McGrath rightly identifies:

> The feature that both characterizes and distinguishes Pentecostalism from all other forms of Christianity is its insistence and emphasis upon an immediate encounter with God through the Holy Spirit and the ensuing transformation of

17. See for example, Jacob Cherian and Joe Thomas, "The Spirit in 2 Corinthians," *Pneuma* 43 (2021): 496–500.

18. Stephen J. Land, *Pentecostal Spirituality: A Passion for the Kingdom* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993), 32.

19. Burgess and Van der Maas, *Dictionary of Pentecostal Charismatic Movements,* xxi.

> individuals. The 'full gospel,' Pentecostals insist, must include the gift of tongues.[20]

Spittler speaks of personal experience as the arena of true religion.[21] Ivan Satyavrata maintains that "the experiential emphasis of Pentecostalism has emerged as a reactionary, but necessary corrective to the cerebral coldness, shallow activism and external formalism of traditional churches." For South Asian Pentecostals "biblical truth must be released from its intellectual captivity and certified in practical experience."[22]

3.2. The Spirit's work transcends race, class, and gender lines

Roger Stronstad draws his central theme of the prophethood of all believers from Luke's charismatic theology—reminding one of the Protestant ideal of the priesthood of all believers.[23] The Holy Spirit is freely available to all believers in Christ, irrespective of their spiritual, intellectual, or socio-economic location in life (Acts 2:4, 38; 8:15–17; 10:44–48; 19:1–7). McGrath credits this emphasis, on the empowerment by the Spirit made available to all, as the key to the appeal of Pentecostalism to those on the margins of society.[24]

While the Protestant reformation upheld the ideal principle of the priesthood of all believers, in practice priest-craft or a clergy–laity divide tends to plague the church today. While it is evident that the pastor–people divide is not completely transcended in Pentecostalism, there appears to be a higher value placed on every member

20. McGrath, *Christianity's Dangerous Idea: The Protestant Revolution*, 424. PCS sees the spiritual gifts of tongues, prophecy and healing having a far more expansive purpose than that envisaged by Cessationists—who, it appears, are facing a losing battle.

21. Spittler, "Pentecostal and Charismatic Spirituality," 1097.

22. Ivan M. Satyavrata, "Contextual Perspectives on Pentecostalism as a Global Culture: A South Asian View," in *Globalization of Pentecostalism,* 211.

23. Roger Stronstad, The *Prophethood of all Believers: A Study in Luke's Charismatic Theology* Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1999.

24. McGrath, *Christianity's Dangerous Idea: The Protestant Revolution*, 427.

exercising their gifts for the benefit of all (along the lines suggested by texts like 1 Cor 12:4–11; 14:26; Eph 5:18–20). Pentecostal–Charismatic groups uphold the sovereignty of the Holy Spirit who orchestrates the gifted life of the Church. A spiritually gifted member may be asked to lead the worship service, speak to the congregation, or even preach from the pulpit, regardless of whether they have been formally ordained by the church or not. However, most Pentecostal churches do also practice some form of ordination to recognise a person's leadership and ministry within the church.

As a consequence of this openness to the ministry of every believer, there is also a proliferation of ministries as gifted individuals lead new ventures. It is common to come across a gifted leader of a large church who has little or no formal theological training.

Another result is that spiritually gifted women often find leadership roles in the church. Pentecostals are quick to point to the divine promise in Joel, now repeated in Acts: "I will pour out my Spirit on all people … on my servants, both men and women" (Acts 2:17, 18). For example, The Foursquare Gospel Church, founded in the 1920s by Aimee Semple McPherson, today has 67,500 churches, 8.8 million adherents, and congregations in 150 countries and territories. The Assemblies of God, the largest Pentecostal denomination, has 69 million adherents in 190 countries. In 2017 there were over 10,000 female ministers of the denomination in USA (27% of the total number of ministers).[25] Yoido Full Gospel Church in Seoul, Korea, with its estimated 700,000 members, is considered the largest church in the world. The majority of its cell-group leaders numbering in the thousands are women. Janet Powers argues that Pentecostal women must build on a Pentecostal hermeneutic for the empowerment of women—a different route than that usually traversed by those using a cultural critique of patriarchy.[26]

25. See statistics at www. ag.org.

26. Janet E. Powers, "'Your Daughters Shall Prophesy': Pentecostal Hermeneutics and the Empowerment of Women," in *Globalization of*

This spiritual egalitarianism remains an ideal ethos for Pentecostal–Charismatic groups. They believe that the Holy Spirit will help overcome psychological and societal barriers. However, self-critical Pentecostals will readily admit that there is still a long way to go in some quarters. Major challenges remain as deep-rooted cultural and hermeneutical biases still hinder and seek to domesticate the transforming work of the Spirit.

3.3. The Spirit empowers and directs worship and witness

The Pentecostal experience is also fundamentally understood as an empowerment for a life of witness. The oft quoted text is, "You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you" (Acts 1:8). The experience of the apostolic church in the book of Acts is highly valued in Pentecostal circles. This shared Evangelical regard for biblical authority, illuminates Pentecostal–Charismatic beliefs and practices.[27] Hence believers are encouraged to see themselves as part of the biblical drama of spreading the gospel, in the power of the Holy Spirit. They see themselves as partners with God in the bringing of the kingdom—reflecting a more Arminian rather than Calvinist theological disposition. They seek to nurture, as Stephen Land puts it, a passion for the Kingdom.[28]

This desire to expand the work of the Kingdom tends to drive Pentecostal-Charismatic Christians to active service in various kinds of evangelistic missions and works of compassion and justice. The Pentecostal experience is in a sense a "gateway into this eschatologically oriented vocation of witness."[29]

In his magisterial work on the Holy Spirit in the letters of Paul, Gordon Fee says:

> In keeping with Paul's Old Testament roots, the presence of God by the Spirit also meant for Paul the powerful and *empowering* presence of God. Life

Pentecostalism, 313–337.

27. Spittler, "Pentecostal and Charismatic Spirituality," 1098.
28. Land, *Pentecostal Spirituality: A Passion for the Kingdom*.
29. Ibid., 66.

> in the present is empowered by the God who dwells among us and in us.[30]

In a Pentecostal gathering, there is often little reliance on a written liturgy—even though there is a planned order of service. But a Spirit-led spontaneity is the order of the service. The aim is to allow the Spirit to direct the service—whether through spontaneous and fervent prayer, kneeling, clapping or raising up of hands, joyful singing or even dancing, a word of prophecy, a word of knowledge, or a call by the leader to come to the altar to pray and be prayed for. Sharing of personal testimonies becomes a setting for mutual encouragement. There is "a shared reliance on the spoken word."[31] Highlighting this oral culture, Walter Hollenweger, a doyen of Pentecostal studies, spoke of Pentecostalism as an oral religion with a global appeal.[32]

This invasion of the divine Spirit into their lives leads Pentecostals–Charismatics to see their vocations in life as places for Christian witness. As McGrath understands it, Pentecostals conceive of a re-sacralization of everyday life—since the transcendent reality of God virtually closed off by modernism is now overthrown with the present reality of God—including through social action and service, political involvement, ecological concerns, along with evangelism.[33]

However, Spittler writes of "otherworldliness" as a prized biblical virtue among early Pentecostals.[34] Much of this is fading with the economic rise and cultural affluence among Pentecostals. Rather, today, there is considerable distress at the rise of the so-called health and wealth gospel that pollutes some influential Pentecostal–Charismatic streams.

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30. Gordon D. Fee, *God's Empowering Presence: The Holy Spirit in the Letters of Paul* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1994), 8.

31. Spittler, "Pentecostal and Charismatic Spirituality," 1097.

32. Walter J. Hollenweger, "Pentecostalism's Global Language," *Renewal Journals* 3:11-15 (2012): 205–209.

33. McGrath, *Christianity's Dangerous Idea: The Protestant Revolution*, 432. See also Rebecca Jaichandran and Madhav B. D. "Pentecostal Spirituality in a Postmodern world," *Asian Journal of Pentecostal Studies* 6:1 (2003): 39–61.

34. Spittler, "Pentecostal and Charismatic Spirituality," 1098.

3.4. Signs—healings, miracles, exorcisms, and the like

Since Pentecostal–Charismatic Christians believe in the present work of the Spirit, there is an active expectation of visible and tangible signs of God's presence and power. There is a premium placed on God's work in people's lives, resulting in transformed lives, physical and emotional healings, exorcisms, miracles, and the like. For many, the book of Acts serves as a manual for church life and growth, where the role of the Spirit in the life of the apostles and the church is highlighted.

It is common to have prayer for matters such as physical and emotional healing, financial needs, and freedom from addictions. Prayer times could be during or at the end of a service, or people with needs may stay back after the service to be prayed for by pastors and/or lay leaders. Often a person's testimony may recount a special experience of grace or an answer to prayer in their life or family, which is further intended to demonstrate an act of God's sovereign intervention, thus encouraging others to persevere in fervent prayer. Providential answers to prayer may sometimes be referred to as miracles; however, experiences of healing or freedom from spiritual or emotional bondages are often shared as testimonies in corporate gatherings to return thanks to God.

Sometimes, there may be psycho-physical manifestations that occur during a service, especially during an extended time of prayer at the altar—manifestations such as weeping, joyful clapping, or people "falling under the power"—not unlike what has been recorded in other movements such as the Welsh and Wesleyan revivals.

4. Lesslie Newbigin and Apostle Paul to Theological Educators

As one engaged in formal theological education for a few decades, I offer these reminders to my colleagues. I have highlighted the exciting reality of the Spirit's move globally, revitalising older ecclesiastical structures

and giving birth to new ones. I have also outlined four prominent features of the Pentecostal-Charismatic movements that have hugely impacted the Evangelical Church. I conclude with insights from Lesslie Newbigin and the apostle Paul.

The influential missionary-theologian Lesslie Newbigin spent three decades serving in India. In *The Household of God* (1953), while analysing the nature of the church, he suggested that there are three major categorical models or approaches in the family of Christian churches.

> Whereas Catholicism and Protestantism have laid immense stress upon what is given and unalterable, the type of Christian faith which I have called Pentecostal has laid its stress upon that which is to be known and recognized in present experience—the power of the ever-living Spirit of God.[35]

Newbigin's discerning judgment, pronounced by one who became a bishop in an episcopal denomination (Church of South India) several decades before the global growth of Pentecostal-Charismatic Christianity, are both perceptive and prophetic.

The theological educator must grasp these exciting possibilities opening up for the whole Church as a result of what Newbigin describes as the "Pentecostal model" of the church.[36] Similarly, all those going into the world to serve in the name of Christ will need to grasp and work alongside this global reality.

The apostle Paul would seek to remind theological educators, "Since we live by the Spirit, let us walk in step with the Spirit" (Gal 5:25). The theological educator will seek to mediate the immanent work of the Spirit and be

35. Lesslie Newbigin, *The Household of God: Lectures on the Nature of the Church* (London: SCM Press, 1953), 98. One wonders whether Newbigin somehow overlooked the estimated 250 million–strong Orthodox Christians or has subsumed under the rubric of Catholic.

36. Two such articulations are: Allan H. Anderson, "Pentecostal-Charismatic Spirituality and Theological Education in Europe from a Global Perspective," *PentecoStudies* 3:1 (2004): 1–15 and Daniel Toph, "Ten Characteristics of Pentecostal Theological Education in the Twenty-first Century," *Pentecostal Education* 5:1-2 (2020): 45–57.

ready for a transmission of *plerōphoria*—a word the apostle employs for the deep conviction generated by the Holy Spirit (1 Thess 1:5).[37] I like to think of this rare word as a metaphor for the significant component of theological formation led and empowered by the Spirit. The noun *plerōphoria*, which comes from the verb "to fill completely or to fulfill," apparently does not occur in classical Greek, but is used by Christian authors. It is found 4 times in the NT (in 1 Thess 1:5; Col 2:2; Heb 6:11; and 10:22); and its use in Col 2:2 is related to *sunesis* (understanding and knowledge).

The goals of theological education in our churches and institutions include those of formation of Christian character, acquisition of biblical/theological knowledge, and an inculcation of ministerial skills. But along with these, we are called to transmit *plerōphoria* – an impartation of spiritual values, personal concern, and a sense of mission—all in the power of the Spirit.

37. See my article "The Parental Paradigm: A Pauline Model for Theological Education," in Roji T. George and A. Varughese John (eds), *Theological Formation for Christian Missions – A Festschrift for Ian Walter Payne* (Bangalore: SAIACS Publications, 2019), 37–39.

ISSUES FACING WITNESS AND DISCIPLESHIP IN THE DIGITAL AGE

IVOR POOBALAN

Abstract: *With the launch of the internet the church is additionally confronted with a vast new frontier of cross-cultural missions as billions today seamlessly move between the environs of physical and digital (cyber) 'space'. The challenge for the church is how to effectively reach and disciple the unreached 'digital natives'; the emerging generation of, 30 years and younger, who constitute over 50% of the global population today.*

Keywords: *Witness, Discipleship, Digital Age, Connected-generation*

1. Introduction

What is the task of the Church? What are the priorities of Christian ministry? These questions confronted me decades ago, at the outset of my journey as a vocational youth worker in my local church. Back then, as today, local church ministries defaulted to programmes and activities as their *raison d'etre* with the accompanying logic that the greater and more-intense our commitment to programmes, the more-likely would be our chances at fulfilling the church's mandate. It didn't take long to realize that it was not sustainable. Programmes did draw larger numbers but did little to foster commitment, engagement, and what was most desirable: the transformation of character and lifestyle.

It was at such a time that I re-encountered Colossians 1:28-29: "We proclaim him, admonishing and teaching everyone with all wisdom, so that we may present everyone fully mature in Christ. To this end I strenuously contend with all the energy Christ so powerfully works in me". It was a transformative moment for me. I could see how all

of Paul's efforts were directed to a singular goal: to present every individual in his care as "fully mature in Christ". Achieving this goal would consume all his energy in *evangelistic proclamation* and *evangelical teaching*. Realising this I was able to reset the focus of the youth ministry. The emphasis shifted from organising effective events to nurturing effective disciples. I had to learn to develop ministry on the paradigm of *witness and discipleship*.

A close examination of the biblical narratives about apostolic ministry, and of the letters they wrote, reveal to us two great priorities that they pursued. On the one hand they were passionate about saving the lost, whether Jew or Gentile (see Romans 15:18-20; 1 Corinthians 9:19-23). On the other hand they were dedicated to the spiritual formation of the new Christians in keeping with a biblical worldview and radical discipleship. This in turn would protect them from falling prey to persuasive heresies (see Galatians 1:6-9; Ephesians 4:11-16) and promote their healthy growth towards mature and fruitful Christian lives (Philippians 1:9-11). In other words the apostles were careful to practise an integrated ministry of *witness* and *discipleship*.

This is the reason that as the Christian faith spread rapidly in the Roman world, Africa and Asia, it was still able to retain its essential moral character and theological integrity. The apostles had maintained both commitments in their obedience to the Great Commission: the *declaration* of the faith together with the *defense* of the faith.

2. Witness and Discipleship as the integrated task of Christian ministry

Witness and *discipleship* are two key terms in the theology of the New Testament.

2.1. Witness

"Witness" (*martyreō, martys, martyria*) occurs nearly one hundred times, with the majority of references in John and Luke. Originally the lexical content had to do with someone recalling an experience that could not be ignored, which

naturally led to its primary use within the legal sphere; that is to say that 'witnesses' are those who give evidence in a trial. Even before the NT era, however, the meaning of the word-group expanded beyond the courtroom to include the expression of moral or philosophical convictions. It is this combination of meanings – testifying to something seen and heard as well as expressing deep, personal convictions – which we find in use in the Gospels and Acts.[1]

The noun *martys* is only used once, and strategically, in Luke 24:48 ("You are witnesses of these things"), and points to the fact that the apostles were exclusive eyewitnesses to the death and resurrection of Jesus. This solemn calling to witness is echoed again in Acts 1:8: "You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you and you will be my witnesses". The qualification of a suitable apostle is later clarified as one who had had first-hand experiences of Jesus from the commencement of his public ministry until his ascension: "one of these must become a witness with us of his resurrection" (Acts 1:21-22).

David Bosch points to the fact that particularly in Luke's paradigm for mission the witness terminology becomes crucial, and "witness" is used as Luke's very term for "mission". So, although Paul and Stephen did not experience the events in the public ministry, crucifixion, and resurrection of Jesus, they too were "witnesses" because of their personal experiences of his life-transforming power and their deep conviction about his status as Lord. Like in the case of Paul and Stephen the Church today derives its identity as "witnesses" and consequently gives testimony to the Gospel, on the basis of the enduring influence of the Resurrected Christ. Bosch comments: "In Acts the content of the witness (the *martyria*) refers, on the whole, to the church's proclamation of the gospel. Primarily "gospel" alludes to the resurrection and *its significance*".[2] It is in this latter sense of the "significance" of the resurrection of Christ that the

1. See, A A Trites, "Witness, Testimony" in Colin Brown ed., *New International Dictionary of the New Testament* Vol 3:1038-1051.

2. David Bosch, *Transforming Mission* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis, 2003), 116.

church down the ages has continued to be "witness" to.

Evangelistic witness to the Gospel of Jesus as Saviour and Lord, however, is most effectively accomplished through the combination of the Church's presence, proclamation, and praxis. Evangelicalism has struggled over the last many decades to decide how to relate proclamation evangelism with social action done in the name of Christ and Christian presence in the world. The Lausanne Covenant in 1974 captures this tension.[3] With regards to social action it states, "We affirm that evangelism and socio-political involvement are both part of our Christian duty. For both are necessary expressions of our doctrines of God and humankind, our love for our neighbour and our obedience to Jesus Christ".[4] It also comments on Christian presence: "Our Christian presence in the world is indispensable to evangelism, and so is that kind of dialogue whose purpose is to listen sensitively in order to understand".[5] But thereafter the Covenant concludes its position by stating, "In the Church's mission of sacrificial service, *evangelism is primary*".[6]

By the third Lausanne Congress in Cape Town (2010) we see a maturing of the evangelical understanding of witness as holistic. In the concluding words of the *Cape Town Commitment,* we read:

> Integral mission is the proclamation and demonstration of the gospel. It is not simply that evangelism and social involvement are to be done alongside each other. Rather, in integral mission our proclamation has social consequences as we call people to love and repentance in all areas of life. And our social involvement has evangelistic consequences as we bear witness to the transforming grace of Jesus Christ.[7]

3. Julia E M Cameron ed., *The Lausanne Legacy – Landmarks in Global Mission* (Massachusetts: Hendrickson, 2016), 13-53.

4. Cameron, *Lausanne Legacy*, 28.

5. Cameron, *Lausanne Legacy*, 24.

6. Cameron, *Lausanne Legacy*, 31.

7. Cameron, *Lausanne Legacy*, 125.

By the fourth Lausanne Congress in Incheon (2024) the holism of integral mission expressed in Cape Town was nuanced further to include "presence" alongside "proclamation" and "demonstration" (practice):

> In the power of his Word and Spirit, God sends us out into the world as a holy people to bear witness to the gospel before a watching world. We do this through our *Christ-filled presence*, our *Christ-centred proclamation*, and our *Christlike practice*. (Matthew 28:18-20)[8]

Evert Van de Poll recognises this as "A kind of *new mission model*: presence, proclamation and practice" (italics added).[9]

2.2. Discipleship

"Disciple" (*mathētēs*, "learner, pupil") is the most frequent designation for those who had committed themselves to be associated with Jesus in his public ministry. In over 300 uses in the NT it is exclusive to the Gospels and Acts. In its original Greek sense a *mathētēs* was someone who bound himself to another to gain his practical and theoretical knowledge, as an "apprentice in a trade, a student of medicine, or a member of a philosophical school". Discipleship was only possible in the company of a "teacher" (*didaskalos*).[10]

Rabbinic Judaism developed this concept further where the learner-teacher relationship was made more intense: "The *talmîd* now, as originally the Gk. *mathētēs*, belongs to his teacher, to whom he subordinates himself in almost servile fashion".[11] As we know Jesus adopted and transformed these fundamental notions of discipleship. Whereas Greek and Rabbinic disciples *volunteered* to come

8. "The Church: The People of God We Love and Build Up" in *The Seoul Statement*, https://lausanne.org/statement/the-seoul-statement. Internet accessed 12 April 2025.

9. Evert Van de Poll, "Evaluating the Lausanne Congress's Seoul Statement", *Evangelical Review of Theology* (2025) 49:1, 9-10.

10. On this see, D Müller, **maqhth"** in Colin Brown ed., *New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology* Vol 1:483-490.

11. Ibid, 485.

under a teacher, Christian discipleship was contingent on the 'call' by the Master. And whereas traditionally disciples attached themselves to a teacher for a limited period of time, until they themselves could separate to become independent teachers themselves, the call to Christian discipleship was absolute and demanded a lifelong commitment of loyalty and obedience to Jesus Christ.

It is this unique character of Christian discipleship that comes through in all the Gospels, but of them Matthew is the most focused on the theme. In comparison to Mark's use of "disciple" forty-six times, and Luke's thirty-seven, Matthew mentions "disciple" seventy-three times. Most significantly he employs the more rare verb, *mathēteuō*, "make disciples" on three of the four occasions in the NT (see, Matthew 13:52; 27:57; 28:19 and Acts 14:21). In the climax to his Gospel he presents Jesus's final commission to the eleven disciples: "Go and *make disciples* of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you" (28:19). In this instruction it is clear that the participles "baptizing" in the name of the triune God, and "teaching" to obey are subordinate to "make disciples", the main verb used with imperatival force.[12]

The only occurrence of the verb *mathēteuō* ("make disciples") in Paul's ministry (Acts 14:21) is most significant because it again expresses Paul's commitment to the integration of witness and discipleship in his praxis of ministry: "After they had *proclaimed the good news* to that city and had *made many disciples*, they returned to Lystra, then on to Iconium and Antioch" (NRSV).[13]

3. Fruitfulness in Witness and Failure in Discipleship: The Malady of Modern Missions

The contemporary condition of global Christianity

12. See, Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 73-74.

13. Also NASB, NAB, Amplified, and NLT; but "taught many" (KJV), "won a large number of disciples" (NIV).

suggests a glaring imbalance. In the last three centuries the church has done remarkably well in the proclamation of the faith, but can the same be said of her building-up of the faithful? Millions have received the Gospel message and joined the church, but to what extent have they been grounded in Christian convictions and enabled to live Christ-like lives?

The period of church history from 1792 – 1910 has been called the "Great Century" by the eminent church historian, Kenneth Scott Latourette. Its *terminus a quo* is the year that William Carey published a book titled, *An Enquiry into the Obligation of Christians to Use Means for the Conversion of the Heathen*, and the terminus ad quem, the year of the first global missionary conference in Edinburgh.[14] Timothy Tennent comments: "Never before had so many Christians moved to so many vast and remote parts of the globe and communicated the gospel across so many cultural boundaries".[15]

What Carey was proposing, in summary, was the formation of mission societies that would focus on the "means" necessary to efficiently and effectively communicate the gospel message to hundreds of people-groups in every part of the globe. The result was the formation of societies such as the Baptist Missionary Society, the Church Missionary Society, the British and Foreign Bible Society, and the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions.[16] The consequence of this dynamic period of European and American missionary efforts is captured in the recently released *State of the Great Commission Report*:[17]

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14. See Timothy C Tennent, *Invitation to World Missions* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Kregel, 2010), 255-283.

15. Tennent, *World Missions*, 256-257.

16. Ibid, 262-263.

17. Victor Nakah and Ivor Poobalan, "The Great Commission: A Theological Basis" in Matthew Niermann ed., *State of the Great Commission – A Report on the Current + Future State, 3-4 (available at:* https://lausanne.org/report?gad_source=1&gclid=Cj0KCQjwnui_BhDlARIsAEo9Guv5VZdYQTTXQotjI2upKA0Bd7qK3PqpLTB0sIJBYD4MgtL0bPEaLvAaAk6aEALw_wcB)

> With thousands of missionaries fanning out across the globe, under the auspices of numerous missions-societies, the evangelization of the two-thirds world has reached unprecedented levels of accomplishment. Christian communities had been planted in Asia, Africa and Latin America in the nineteenth century, were watered by mass evangelistic initiatives of Western evangelical organizations in the twentieth. Simultaneously unprecedented numbers of indigenous missions-movements throughout the global south intensified efforts at witnessing to Christ in ways that were contextually effective.
>
> The result has been exponential church growth leading to the surprising realization by the turn of the twenty-first century that the face of Christianity was no longer stereotypically white. The image of Christianity in the world was more likely to be black African, Latin American or East Asian! Philip Jenkins projected in 2002 that of 2.6 billion Christians estimated for 2025, "633 million would live in Africa, 640 million in Latin America, and 460 million in Asia. Europe, with 555million, would have slipped to third place".[18]

It is a matter of grave curiosity that as late as the 1990s this staggering shift in the centre of gravity of Christian presence was not granted any recognition within academia. Tennent illustrates this inexplicable omission:

> As late as the year 1990 when *Christian History* magazine listed the one hundred most significant

18. On these statistical projections see Philip Jenkins, *The Next Christendom* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 2-3; he adds: "[T]he stereotype holds that Christians are un-Black, un-poor, and un-young. If that is true, then the growing secularization of the West can only mean that Christianity is in its dying days. Globally, the faith of the future must be Islam. Over the past century, however, the center of gravity in the Christian world has shifted inexorably southward, to Africa, Asia and Latin America."

> events in the history of Christianity, there was not a single reference to any event taking place in the Majority World or initiated by Majority World Christians. We sometimes forget from today's vantage-point how slow the church has been in recognizing the dramatic
>
> global developments in the Christian church throughout Africa, Asia and Latin America.[19]

Tennent goes further to point to the exponential, five-thousand percent, growth of independent indigenous Christian movements in the global south: "from only eight million at the turn of the twentieth century to 423 million by the close of the twenty-first century".[20]

Following on from this, Victor Nakah and Ivor Poobalan comment:

> Never since the early centuries, has Christianity grown so rapidly in previously un-evangelised societies in Latin America, Africa and Asia. The most-recent stories of church growth in Asia for example – in places such as China, Iran, and Nepal – are nothing short of miraculous, because the Gospel has thrived in predominantly communist, Islamic, and Hindu contexts where sustained antipathy and hostility have been most vocal and active.
>
> Yet, unlike the apostolic and post-apostolic period, the modern church's commitment to *witness* has not been accompanied by a concomitant commitment to disciple-making. As a result we are forced to concede today that Christian spirituality is at risk of becoming 'a mile long and an inch deep'. In the evangelical Church's enthusiasm to contend with liberal theology and assert the uniqueness

19. Timothy C Tennent, "Lausanne and Global Evangelicalism: Theological Distinctives and Missiological Impact" in Margunn Serigstad Dahle, Lars Dahle, Knud Jorgensen eds., *The Lausanne Movement: A Range of Perspectives* (Oxford: Regnum, 2014), 57.

20. Tennent, "Lausanne and Global Evangelicalism", 58.

> of Christ and the necessity for evangelistic proclamation, did she fail to prepare adequately for the harvest of new believers that would emerge following the faithful witness of vibrant church communities?[21]

Especially following the most significant, historic gathering of 2700 global evangelical leaders at Lausanne in 1974, where they covenanted to a fresh impetus in world evangelization, Christian mission towards unreached people groups was energised and accelerated. But little or no emphasis was placed on the vital importance of discipleship, spirituality and formation. This is the subject of Sarah Nicholl's *Integrated Mission*, in which she laments the lack of integration of spirituality and missional action in the broader evangelical world.[22] Her work focuses on the Lausanne Movement and its foundational documents (*The Lausanne Covenant, The Manila Manifesto, The Cape Town Commitment*) as a means of ascertaining how evangelicals have fared, globally:

> *The [Cape Town] Commitment* gives more credence to the world and the laity ministering within it. It also guides missioners to the type of life they ought to live. For me, this expansion of practice within the world increases the burden of mission on the laity without providing a way of formation or direction based on a life under God the Creator, in Christ, and through the power of the Holy Spirit, that is, with the Triune God. I consider that Lausanne's proposals of more education for Church leaders, though helpful, is inadequate. In my view, *the lack of a formative spirituality for leaders and laity alike is a significant lacuna that needs challenging* (italics added).[23]

It is telling that with the very last book John Stott wrote, before he "lay down his pen for the last time", he

21. Victor Nakah and Ivor Poobalan, "The Great Commission", 4.

22. Sarah Nicholl, *Integrated Mission* (Carlisle, Cumbria: Langham Academic, 2024).

23. Nicholl, *Integrated Mission*, 47.

determined that it should be about 'radical discipleship'. He wanted to address the response of a believer that goes beyond a mere claim to a Christian identity: "My concern in this book is that we who claim to be disciples of the Lord Jesus will not provoke him to say again, 'Why do you call me "Lord, Lord", and do not do what I say?' For genuine discipleship is wholehearted discipleship".[24]

In a global survey conducted over a 10-month period (September 2020 – July 2021) and involving dozens of 'listening calls', a team of mission leaders pursued responses to five key questions. The first of these was, "What are the most significant gaps or remaining opportunities for the fulfilment of the Great Commission?" The notes from all the listening calls, amounting to over 104,000 words were scientifically coded and analysed and yielded eleven 'significant gaps' globally. In ascending order of importance, they are: marketplace and workplace ministries, contextualization, cross-cultural missions, creation care, Muslim evangelism, unreached people groups, unresponsiveness of churches to the external world, diversity in leadership, love and unity, and reaching younger generations. The concern that came out on top globally was the need for *discipleship*.[25]

The survey confirmed, what has been a matter of unease for years, that the most critical 'gap' in global Christianity is the lack of clarity and commitment within evangelicalism to nurture authentic Christian discipleship. This is the cry from the ground, and after years of neglect the rich harvest of new believers around the world faces the two gravest threats to their progress in sanctification and maturity: the impulse towards *erroneous beliefs* and the impulse towards *unchristian behaviour*.

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24. John Stott, *Radical Disciple: Some Neglected Aspects of Our Calling* (UK: Inter-Varsity Press, 2012), 9.

25. "Analysis of Lausanne 4 Listening Calls", chrome-extension://efaidnbmnnnibpcajpcglclefindmkaj/https://lausanne.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/The-Evangelical-Church-Interacting-between-the-Global-and-the-Local-Global-Listening-Team-Report-21.11.03.pdf Internet accessed 10 April 2025

4. The Vulnerability of First-Generation Christians to Misbelief and Misbehaviour

The first is the risk of *misbelief*; the vulnerability to confuse the essential message of the Gospel of Christ. This was the ongoing burden evident in all the writings of the NT. In almost all of the Pauline epistles we find him arguing against some heretical tendency or the other, urging his people to "not be deceived by fine-sounding arguments" (Colossians 2:4; cf. 2:8; Philippians 3:2; Galatians 4:17; 2 Corinthians 11:1-4). The recognition of heterodox teachings and the grave danger these posed to the early Christians come into sharper relief in the later documents of the NT such as the Pastoral Letters and the letters of John and Jude.[26] The purpose statement of the brief epistle of Jude states:

> "Dear friends, although I was very eager to write to you about the salvation we share, *I felt compelled to write and urge you to contend for the faith that was once for all entrusted to God's holy people*. For certain individuals whose condemnation was written about long ago have secretly slipped in among you. They are ungodly people, who pervert the grace of our God into a license for immorality and deny Jesus Christ our only Sovereign and Lord" (vv.3-4)

In a similar vein, millions of Christians in the majority world are currently bombarded by heterodox teachings that distort and pervert the truth of Christ's Gospel. But unlike the Early Church there is little recognition of their insidious power to cause the Church to implode and little alarm raised by church leaders tasked with the shepherding of the faithful.

On the heels of the greatest global expansion of the Christian faith since the apostolic period,[27] we are seeing the

26. For a discussion on the development of 'sound doctrine' in the New Testament Church see, Ivor Poobalan, "The Emergence of the Deposit of Faith" in Nathanael Somanathan ed., *The Faith Entrusted* (Kohuwela, Sri Lanka: Colombo Theological Seminary, 2020), 51-77.

27. Tennent, *Invitation to World Missions*, 256: "During that period

advent of false teachers and false teachings filling the space that ought to have been occupied by dedicated pastors and teachers instructing the young believers on "what is appropriate to sound doctrine" (Titus 2:1). This concern is captured in the preamble to *The Seoul Statement* released by the Lausanne Movement in September 2024:

> We regret that during the last 50 years of evangelistic harvest, the global church has not adequately provided the teaching necessary to help new believers develop a truly biblical worldview. The church has often failed to nurture new believers to obey Christ's call to radical discipleship at home, at school, in the church, in our neighbourhoods, and in the marketplace. It has also struggled to equip its leaders to respond to trending social values and to distortions of the gospel, which have threatened to erode the sincere faith of Christians and to destroy the unity and fellowship of the church of the Lord Jesus. Consequently, we are alarmed by the rise of false teachings and pseudo-Christian lifestyles, leading numerous believers away from the essential values of the gospel.[28]

In fact even at this late hour the lack of interest and awareness of the trends affecting these young churches of the global south is incomprehensible. A Kenyan scholar, John Mbiti commented in the 1970s: "It is utterly scandalous for so many Christian scholars in the old Christendom to know so much about heretical movements in the second and third centuries, when so few of them know anything about Christian movements in areas of the younger churches".[29]

The second grave danger of the lack of committed

[the Great Century], which is roughly coterminous with the nineteenth century, more new Christians emerged from a wider number of new people groups than at any previous time in the history of the church."

28. See, "Preamble", *The Seoul Statement*, https://lausanne.org/statement/the-seoul-statement. Internet accessed 11 April 2025.

29. Cited in Jenkins, *Next Christendom*, 4.

disciple-making is the risk of *misbehaviour*. When Christians are not grounded in the knowledge of God's Word and have not become disciplined in the application of the principles of Scripture to everyday living, ethical and moral distortions emerge that eventually become normalised. These then gradually and decisively influence the wider body of believers because of the natural openness that exist in Christian relationships, until finally whole communities become incapable of discerning its wrong, even scandalous, value-systems such as sexual immorality, conflictual nature, racism and materialism. It is this danger that prompted Paul to warn the Corinthians: "Do you not know that a little leaven leavens the whole lump?" (1 Corinthians 5:6).

In fact it is not rare to hear that an evangelical leader, often with great national or international standing, has been accused of scandalous behaviour and grave sin in the areas of financial misappropriation, sexual misconduct or the abuse of power. Worse, it is not rare to hear of churches and denominations that have made concentrated efforts to cover-up such wrongdoing. This concern is captured in *The Seoul Statement* (2024):

> . . . despite our claim to be followers of our crucified Lord, we have often failed to live in keeping with the holy pattern of life he gave to us and to teach others to do the same. The result has been a steady stream of reports of financial mismanagement, of sexual misconduct and abuse, of abuse of power among leaders, of efforts to cover-up these failures while ignoring the pain of those who have suffered because of them, and of spiritual anaemia and immaturity in evangelical churches around the world.[30]

What has been sorely lacking with regard to discipleship is what, in 1792, Carey urged for with regard to evangelistic witness: "the obligation of Christians to use means". With

30. See, "Discipleship: Our Calling to Holiness and Mission" *The Seoul Statement*, https://lausanne.org/statement/the-seoul-statement. Internet accessed 11 April 2025.

pastors unable to cope with overwhelming numbers, and seminaries remaining fixated on traditional models of education, the field has been left wide open for passionate and creative individuals to lead scores of sincere believers to misbelieve and misbehave.

The question that confronts us is, what will happen to these hundreds of millions of new believers should the church not put in place the "means" by which they would all be faithfully instructed and empowered to live consistent Christian lives of theological and ethical integrity.

On this we will do well to look back to the practices of the Early Church, immediately following the New Testament era, when careful systems were put in place to nurture and establish the converts in the rudiments of Christian discipleship through "catechesis", which required a great amount of effort on the part of Church elders:[31]

> Catechesis was seen as a major task of Church leaders. Many of the well-known leaders of the ancient Church set aside much time and energy for instructing new believers in the faith, in spite of their many administrative tasks.[32]

Catechesis was required for all new church members, and aimed at what was considered the "proper formation", which "taught people how to live and what to believe, on the basis of the Holy Scriptures". This Christian instruction had a rudimentary curriculum that included teaching on the meaning of the sacraments, the learning of the 'Lord's Prayer' and the Creeds by heart, and participation in the weekly liturgy of the Church:

The liturgy was the early Church's most effective manner of Christian formation for all its members. After the formal period of instruction, followed by Baptism, the believers were weekly taught the Christian life through the liturgy of the Church – the verbal and visual re-enactment of all the basic aspects of the Christian faith they had

31. John Kafwanka and Mark Oxbrow ed. *Intentional Discipleship and Disciple-Making* (London: Anglican Consultative Council, 2016), 29-30.

32. Kafwanka and Oxbrow, *Intentional Discipleship and Disciple-Making*, 29.

learned about. Through its liturgy and all aspects of it, they were taught how to be true followers of Jesus Christ.[33]

Following the twentieth century shift in the centre of gravity of global Christianity from the global north to the global south – from being primarily an extension of the established traditions of western Christendom to becoming increasingly the harvest of first-generation believers through indigenous Christian witness – there is an urgent need for relevant, thought-through methods (in Calvin's terms, "the use of means") that aim to ground believers in "how to be true followers of Jesus Christ". The woeful lack of emphasis on effective 'catechesis' in modern evangelicalism, therefore, threatens to significantly undermine the integrity of our Christian witness in the twenty-first century.

5. The Digital World: The New Frontier in Cross-Cultural Missions

5.1. Constructing Cyberspace: Internet, Mobile Technology and Social Media

"New media" is a term used to describe a whole range of digital technologies and forms of media, including computers, the internet, cell phones and smart phones, social networking software, and digital recording devices.[34]

The launch of the *Internet* (or World Wide Web) in the 1990s added new levels of complexity to the challenges of witness and discipleship. People began accommodating themselves *en masse* to this new environment, while a whole new generation – the Millennials – was being born into it. Between 2000 and 2015 the number of people accessing the internet globally grew from 6.5 percent to 43 percent. By early 2025 that number soared to 67.5 percent, which amounts to 5.56 billion users.

33. See, Kafwanka and Oxbrow, *Intentional Discipleship*, 29-30.

34. Heidi A Campbell and Stephen Garner, *Networked Theology: Negotiating Faith in Digital Culture* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2016), 40.

Smartphones were first introduced in 1992, but became commonplace from around 2012. Today mobile technology has become almost an extension of the human body. Smartphone sales during the period 2007-2014 averaged 512 million a year. In 2024 the number of smartphones sold reached 1.22 billion. With regard to smart phone engagement, conservative estimates suggest that a person checks his or her device over 1000 times a week.

Social Media first became a thing when the number of monthly users on MySpace reached a million in 2004. Since then the number of people on social media has grown to reach 5.24 billion in 2025, with most using more than one platform regularly. Six platforms (FB, YouTube, Instagram, WhatsApp, TikTok, and WeChat) have over 1 billion users each. FB has 3.07 billion, YouTube 2.53 billion, and Instagram 2 billion. On average a user spends 2 hours and 21 minutes on social media every day.

But aren't these nothing more than the impressive statistics about a successful new product? How is all this different from the numerous occasions when the world was confronted by innovative new technology?

The digital world is not like anything we have known before – it is the appearance of something entirely new in human experience:

> We are living through *a unique period of human history, an intense period of flux, change and disruption that may never be repeated*. A seismic shift in living and thinking is taking place due to the rapid and pervasive introduction of new technologies to daily life, which has changed the way we communicate, work, shop, socialize, and do almost everything else. This moment in time is not unlike the Enlightenment (1650-1800), when there were also great shifts in awareness, knowledge, and technology, accompanied by great societal changes (italics added).[35]

Campbell and Garner concur with this view, arguing that

35. Mary Aiken, *The Cyber Effect* (London: John Murray, 2016), 8.

digitality has transformed the way society is being imagined and constructed:

> This creates a situation where people function more as connected individuals and less as embedded group members. Thus, the network in the network society is a distinctive social system undergirded by digital communication technologies that promote new forms of social connection and information sharing and encourage individual choice and freedom".[36]

As much as we are tempted to think of the reality of cyber – internet, mobile technology and social media – as a mere phase that humanity has entered, it is necessary for us to recognize that cyberspace is an *actual place*:

> Cyberspace is a distinct place. You may be accessing it from a familiar environment, like the comfort of your own home, but as soon as you go online, you have traveled to a different location in terms of your awareness or consciousness, your emotions, your responses, and your behavior – which will vary depending on your age, your physical and mental development, and your distinct set of personality traits.[37]

People have fantasised for centuries if the universe held the potential of other worlds for humans to occupy, and even today scientists search distant galaxies for that elusive planet that may offer the conditions conducive for human habitation. Strange as it may seem, that day has arrived in an entirely unexpected manner. For the first time in history people have the *psychological* option of carrying on their lives in two distinct worlds: the world of physical space and the world of cyberspace.

Many who reflect on this phenomenon, though, were born before the age of the internet. They engage in cyberspace using the terms of reference and the cues honed through their interactions in the physical world. These

36. Campbell and Garner, *Networked Theology*, 9.
37. Aiken, *Cyber Effect*, 9-10.

are the *digital migrants* struggling to acclimatise to this unfamiliar environment.

5.2. But have we not reached a tipping point?

Fifty-two percent of the world's population today are under thirty years of age, and every one of them may be rightly called a *digital native*. The internet, social media, and mobile technology constitute their primary frame of reference and construct the environment for their being. Adam Greenfield explains it well:

> Networked digital information technology has become the dominant mode through which we experience the everyday. In some important sense this class of technology now mediates just about everything we do. It is simultaneously the conduit through which our choices are delivered to us, the mirror by which we see ourselves reflected, and the lens that lets others see us on a level previously unimagined.[38]

This changed environment has a profound impact on human being and behaviour. As Mary Aiken argues:

> As complex as human beings are, and as adaptable, psychologists know from a myriad of studies and research that when an individual moves to any new location – a new home, a new school, a new city, or a foreign country – his or her behaviour will change or adapt . . . according to theories of development, an awareness of self comes through a gradual process of adaptation to one's environment.[39]

We have all experienced the tendency to behave very differently when we are online in comparison to our behaviour in person. One of these little-discussed factors is the *online disinhibition effect*, an uncharacteristic level of adventurism, which arises from an illusionary belief

38. Adam Greenfield, *Radical Technologies: The Design of Everyday Life*, cited in Vo Huong Nam, *Digital Media and Youth Discipleship* (Carlisle, Cumbria: Langham, 2023), 26.

39. Aiken, *Cyber Effect*, 10.

that somehow our digital environments carry fewer risks. Consequently, people lose their inhibitions and behave differently, even like 'drunks' within this space: "Disinhibition is facilitated by the environmental conditions of cyberspace – by the perceived lack of authority, the anonymity, as well as the sense of distance or physical remove".[40]

Another important behavioural factor is *online escalation*, where "problem behaviours become bigger – or amplified – online". Aiken argues: "Whenever technology comes in contact with an underlying predisposition, or tendency for a certain behaviour, it can result in behavioural amplification or escalation".[41]

Nam Vo, however, alerts us to the positive accentuation of online behaviour through the work of Don Tapscott in his book, *Growing Up Digital*, in which he identifies eight characteristics of the 'Net Generation': "freedom of choice, customization, collaboration, scepticism, integrity, entertainment, speed, innovation". Understanding these tendencies will foster greater openness and empathy when engaging with people shaped within cyberspace:

> The youth seek freedom in everything they do, from freedom of choice to freedom of expression. They want to have fun in their work, education, family and social life. They are very collaborative through the practice of playing multi-user video games; texting each other instantly; and sharing files for school, work or just for fun. They also influence each other through online discussion. They seek innovative environments and are constantly looking for innovative ways to collaborate, entertain themselves, learn and work.[42]

The 'accent' of digital natives (if we care enough to listen) will demonstrate how differently their values, priorities and

40. Aiken, *Cyber Effect*, 21.
41. Aiken, *Cyber Effect*, 22.
42. Don Tapscott, *Growing Up* Digital, cited in, Vo Huong Nam, *Digital Media and Youth Discipleship*, 20-21.

behaviours are shaped, *in comparison to those who are digital migrants* of the cultural divide. These differences may give rise to prejudice and alienation and prevent Christians from the pre-internet generation from interacting meaningfully in the digital world.

6. Witness and Discipleship in a Digital World

Effectively communicating the gospel with people of the 'Net' generation, and facilitating their discipleship, presents the greatest challenge to cross-cultural missions since the apostolic era. The challenge then was to communicate the Gospel of a Jewish Messiah to a gentile world that had no prior interest in any such information. Most members of the definitively Jewish Church of the apostolic period at best had a centripetal conceptualization of witness: if Gentiles wished to become a part of the messianic community, they would need to appropriately move into the Jewish space of early Christianity and become socialised there.

The Book of Acts and the letters of Paul in particular show how the Holy Spirit drove the Church towards a radically different conceptualization of Christian missions, a centrifugal model. The Gospel was to be carried by its witnesses from Jerusalem and Judea, to Samaria and to the ends of the earth. This created irreconcilable tensions, misunderstandings, and conflict, threatening the Church with irrevocable fragmentation were it not for the robust theology and tireless pastoral engagement of the apostles. To them, especially Paul, *the call to evangelistic witness* demanded the willingness to "become all things to all people" (1 Corinthians 9:22). At the same time *the responsibility of evangelical discipleship* demanded that they eschew any tendency towards a divided Christianity (1 Corinthians 1:13; Galatians 3:28).

In order to pursue their Great Commission mandate more efficiently, the apostles utilized the 'latest' technology available to them; most notably the efficient means of transportation of the Roman road network, and the Greco-

Roman conventions of letter-writing. This same logic is seen with the Protestant Reformation of the sixteenth century, when the latest invention of the printing press enabled the new movement to scale up the propagation of its core beliefs.

The onset of the digital age similarly affords to the church unprecedented opportunities to evangelize millions who may otherwise be both physically and culturally beyond reach. Technology allows us the opportunity to create and distribute the evangelistic message, faster and much farther. This utilitarian value of tech, however, must be accompanied by a deep commitment to the interpersonal nature of the evangelistic task, because ultimately evangelism is about lost, confused, sinful and broken people discovering the good news of the Saviour through the witness of those who will identify with them.[43] Furthermore, Christian witness must be carried out in its essentially cross-cultural spirit, which means the church must make the necessary effort to learn the 'language' and 'culture' of her audience in order to be understood.[44]

Discipling people in digital spaces similarly demands a re-evaluation of our present paradigms and strategies. For example, it is a "fundamental premise of social media that physical presence is not required". The latter challenges the notion, that has existed for centuries, that disciple-making is a ministry done only through face-to-face encounters, individually or in small-group settings, within the context of the 'local' church or another 'local' Christian ministry.

Upon reflection, however, it is evident that even Paul was often severely limited in regard to physical proximity,

43. "In digital evangelism there needs to be a balance between the clear, compelling and coherent delivery of the gospel message and nurturing authentic relationships", https://lausanne.org/occasional-paper/christian-faith-and-technology Internet accessed 09 June 2025.

44. "[T]he church needs to reflect on how to articulate and embody the gospel not only in digital spaces but also is a cultural condition increasingly shaped by the digital. This means striving to become conversant in digital spaces, understanding the logic of different platforms, each with their own microcosms, social conventions, and languages", https://lausanne.org/occasional-paper/christian-faith-and-technology Internet accessed 09 June 2025.

due to distance or imprisonment. Such limitations did not prevent him from pursuing his ministry aspirations to "make disciples of all nations"; *he resorted to the technology of the day* – letter-writing and the Roman Road network – to reach churches, including those in Colossae and Laodicea whom Paul had never even seen, so as to facilitate their deeper growth towards greater faithfulness to Christ. Paul's innovative, begin-with-the-end-in-mind approach may help us adopt a more positive approach to facilitating Christian formation and growth in a digital world.

Technology has enabled the proliferation of 'digital tools such as prayer-apps, podcasts, online forums and digitized Bibles',[45] which have proven to be hugely beneficial to Christian formation and pastoral care ministry.

We must also recognize that the profound shift to 'networked society' means that people are no longer locked into just one, local, homogenous fellowship; in digital culture individuals belong to multiple groups on the basis of shared interests and personal affinity. This requires Christian leaders and mentors to eschew hierarchy and see themselves as facilitators of community and curators of content, assisting young believers to develop the character and the skills to live as effective disciples within networked society.[46]

Two additional benefits for discipling that is afforded by digitality must be noted. The first is that it may be a unique blessing for isolated Christians living out their faith as a minority religion in the context of majority (and even hostile) religious cultures. Digitality provides unlimited potential to connect with the wider, even global, church for fellowship, study, worship and acts of mission. Second, unlike traditional, 'local' Christian communities, those who sign up to participate in online Christian communities will more likely do so due to a *very high level of personal motivation*, because life on the net is predicated on individual choice, and people 'show up' because they genuinely want to do so. This high level of personal

45. Ibid.
46. Ibid.

investment can create the conditions for more effective mentoring of young Christians to become radical and productive disciples of Jesus Christ.

7. A Connected Generation and a Disconnected Church

The sheer inescapability of digital technology means that it is important for churches and youth leaders to learn not only to recognize but even to take advantage of the good aspects of digital technology in discipling youth.[47]

The challenges and the opportunities posed to the Church by the digital world may have more similarity, than usually granted, to the issues faced by the apostles. Most Christian leaders and decision makers belong to a generation older and culturally strange to the Millennials. How these leaders choose to respond to the reality of a single humanity occupying two lived-spaces, developing two different patterns of behaviour and creating two very distinct models of community, will determine the opportunities for Gospel-influence in the unfolding human drama.

Sadly though, there is a global disconnect between the Church and the Net Generation. Unlike the speed with which she utilised the Roman Road network and Greco-Roman letter-writing conventions in the first century, or the way she exploited the scaling-up potential offered by the printing press in the sixteenth century, the church of the twenty-first century runs the risk of having to play catch up in the age of the information super highway:

> Whenever a new technology hits the market, the Church's first reaction is to think that it is relevant only for commercial purposes. It happened with radio, then TV and now it is happening with Social Media.[48]

Our ambivalence and neglect has not only distanced

47. Huong Nam, *Digital Media and Youth Discipleship*, 203.

48. Lazarus, Natchi. *The Connected Church: A Social Media Communication Strategy Guide for Churches, Nonprofits and Individuals in Ministry* (p. 55). Natchi Lazarus. Kindle Edition.

Christianity from unreached youth, it has led to staggering numbers of Christianised young people exiting church communities at speed. This is seen in the phenomenon of the rising numbers of *Nones* in previously highly-Christianised societies such as Europe, North America and South Korea. 'Nones' are those who check 'atheist', 'agnostic' or 'nothing in particular' when asked to indicate their religious affiliation. In the US this number has grown from single digits in the 1990s to 28% of the population.[49] Soon it is expected to be the largest 'religious' grouping in the country. This has also been a worrying trend in South Korea, the theatre of the most dramatic Christian revival of the late twentieth century. Many from the second-generation are opting to disaffiliate from the church.

> According to the national census report released in 2015, the majority (56.1 percent) of South Koreans are not affiliated to any particular religion, marking an increase by 9 percent since 2005. The percentage of 'nones' is higher among younger adults, with its share reaching 64.9 percent among people in their 20s, than people in their 60s (57.7 percent) or 70s (58.2 percent).[50]

'Nones' are a growing factor in all societies, as traditions of religious and cultural authority get reordered online. This then provides the church with great opportunities for Gospel-engagement as previously tightly controlled communities give way and their members pursue greater freedom, openness, and collaboration. In fact, it has been one of the reasons for the dramatic growth of the Church in places like Iran, where internet and social media provided the only access to millions who had otherwise been beyond missional reach.

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49. "Religious 'Nones' in America: Who They Are and What They Believe", Pew Research Centre, https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2024/01/24/religious-nones-in-america-who-they-are-and-what-they-believe/ Internet accessed 12 April 2025.

50. Steve Sang-Cheol Moon, "Reaching the World's Nonreligious", https://lausanne.org/globalanalysis/reaching-the-worlds-rising-nonreligious.

Natchi Lazarus speaks about eight key characteristics of the 'Connected Audience' (he is careful though to explain that the Connected Audience is not restricted to a particular generation):

1. Access to information – "when in doubt they Google"
2. Eager to learn and research
3. Always connected (to each other, church, ministry and world) – "restless when they do not have connectivity"
4. Open to other opinions and point of view
5. Values convenience
6. Willing to be your brand ambassador or evangelist
7. Are not exclusively yours
8. Appreciate uniqueness and value[51]

Leveraging these factors can help the Church navigate the challenges and opportunities to witness and make disciples in the digital world:

> Social media can be an important tool to help us fulfil this mission. Thanks to the internet and social media, this generation is better equipped to fulfil the Great Commission than any other generation that ever existed.[52]

But herein is the rub. Many in the Church are struggling to know how to evaluate the merits and demerits of the digital world. The fact that critical aspects of human life – such as presence and embodied actions in relationships – are non-transferable raises important theological and existential questions. A recent work that addresses some of the most

51. Natchi Lazarus, *The Connected Church* (Natchi Muthu Lazarus, 2017), 48-53.

52. Lazarus, *The Connected Church*, 65

frequently asked questions about the Church in a digital age came out in 2022. Its theological and pragmatic approach is insightful, as the paper addresses several issues such as: the question of a 'disembodied' Church, authentic community, worship (and communion) online, leadership, ethics, and missional opportunities.[53]

The overall thrust of the paper is the importance of recognizing the immense potential of the digital world for witness and discipleship.[54] Regardless of the choices made concerning the application of digital technology in the life of the church, we are witnessing radical cultural changes in the wake of the digital revolution. There are, as such, larger contextual questions of how faith is shaped and communicated in societies saturated by technology. How to remain a faithful witness in a digital age is something that the church will have to continue to grapple with in the years to come.[55]

The authors of "Christian Faith and Technology" (2024) conclude with a reflection on the challenges facing the Church in an increasingly technological age:

> The development of AI highlights the urgent demand for the kind of reflection that we have sought to demonstrate in this paper. A central argument that we have advanced is that whether we use the technology or not, its wider societal, cultural, and spiritual ramifications cannot be ignored. Whilst we need to encourage the church to explore the affordances of technological tools,

53. Jonas Kurlberg, Vo Huong Nam and Sara Afshari, *Being Church in a Digital Age* (Lausanne Occasional Paper 68) 2022. This was followed up by a Lausanne occasional paper titled, "Christian Faith and Technology" (2024), https://lausanne.org/occasional-paper/christian-faith-and-technology

54. Kurlberg et al, *Being Church in a Digital Age*, 21: "Regardless of the choices made concerning the application of digital technology in the life of the church, we are witnessing radical cultural changes in the wake of the digital revolution. There are, as such, larger contextual questions of how faith is shaped and communicated in societies saturated by technology. How to remain a faithful witness in a digital age is something that the church will have to continue to grapple with in the years to come".

55. Kurlberg et al, *Being Church in a Digital Age*, 21.

the key question is how do we live faithfully and missionally in a technological world.[56]

8. Conclusion

It is now some decades since that pivotal moment in my journey in Christian leadership. The apostolic model for Christian ministry – to *witness to the good news* and to *make disciples of Jesus Christ* – remains our unchanging imperative, and, like the early Christians, each succeeding generation of the Church has had to apply these priorities according to the particular contextual realities that confronted them. The history of Christianity, then, is the story of how successful the Church was in carrying out her mandate in proclamation and pastoral care.

In this paper we have argued that from the turn of the twenty-first century, with the launch of the internet, the contextual reality of people has changed globally. Cyberspace has created the possibility of humans living simultaneously within a reality that can only be described as an 'alternate' place of being. This means that our social and cultural context has dramatically altered as we find ourselves moving seamlessly in and out of two spheres of living: the old, familiar world of physicality and the new, serendipitous world of digitality.

With the rise of the Millennials and the generations following, the world has gone through a 'seismic shift', as larger numbers in society now consider digital spaces as their primary 'place'; the 'world' in which they live, learn, and love.

With 52 percent of all humans on the planet being less than 30 years of age, digital space, with its ubiquitous cultural norms, may be construed as the great frontier for Christian mission ever since *Jewish* apostles like Paul looked across at the unsaved world of Gentile peoples. Those who dedicated themselves to the Gentile-mission encountered unprecedented challenges in the contextualization of

56. https://lausanne.org/occasional-paper/christian-faith-and-technology Internet accessed 12 April 2025.

the gospel message and inculturation among non-Jewish peoples. The rapid spread of the Christian faith in the early centuries, against all odds, is a testament to the dedicated creativity of the early Christians to this missionary cause.

In the present context of the digital world and the prospects of a rapidly changing, tech-induced world, the Church is summoned afresh to a similar, dedicated creativity to undertake the work of *witness* and *discipleship* among the unreached millions of the 'Net-generation'.

Yet, these priorities cannot be considered except against the backdrop of recent evangelical Christianity's 'fruitfulness in witness and failure in discipleship'. In other words, global evangelicalism, which has shown remarkable strength and enterprise in the proclamation of the gospel, must urgently prioritize the 'means' by which she may develop and demonstrate a credible model of Christian discipleship and mature Christian living. Failure to do so may replicate in the unexplored digital world the vulnerability of first-generation Christian spirituality in the global south today: "a mile wide and an inch deep".

PROCLAIMING THE GOSPEL IN SRI LANKA: SOME LESSONS FROM THE METHODIST HERITAGE[1]

AJITH FERNANDO

Abstract: *This article appeals to enduring significance of evangelism as a core tenet of the Methodist movement, rooted John Wesley's conviction regarding humanity's spiritual lostness and the redemptive efficacy of the gospel. The author recalls the historical context of early Methodist preaching and turns his attention to the contemporary landscape of evangelism in Sri Lanka with its own cultural nuances, socio-economic realities, and other religious traditions which present complex challenges to the church's mission. To navigate these complexities, the author proposes a multifaceted evangelistic strategy that integrates a solid theological framework with a commitment to social justice and meaningful engagement with diverse societal segments, including the business sector and intellectual communities. The article emphasizes the crucial role of small groups and the value of communal hymn-singing as a means of theological formation.*

Keywords: *John Wesley, Methodist movement, evangelism, class meetings, bands, hymns*

1. Passion for Evangelism

The primacy of evangelism in the Methodist movement is evidenced in what John Wesley (1703-1791) stated under the question: "What are the rules of a Helper?" His eleventh of twelve points is, "You have nothing to do but to save souls. Therefore, spend and be spent in this work. And go always, not only to those that want you, but to those

1. This article was originally presented as a conference paper at the bicentennial of the Methodist Church Sri Lanka held in Moratuwa in October 2013.

that want you most."[2] He went on to say, "Observe: It is not your business to preach so many times, and to take care of this or that society; but to save as many souls as you can; to bring as many sinners as you possibly can to repentance, and with all your power to build them up in that holiness without which they cannot see the Lord." We know, of course, that helpers in the early Methodist movement were involved in doing many other things with Wesley's approval. But the above statement gives an indication of the primacy of evangelism in the Methodist agenda.

One of the factors fuelling the passion for evangelism in Methodism was a sense of the lostness of people apart from Christ and the huge difference Christ makes in their lives. The urgency of Wesley's appeal to people is heard in his sermon, 'Awake, Thou that Sleepeth,' in which he exhorted,

> Awake, thou everlasting spirit, out of thy dream of worldly happiness! Did not God create thee for himself? Then thou canst not rest till thou restest in him. Return, thou wanderer! Fly back to thy ark. This is not thy home. Think not of building tabernacles here. Thou art but a stranger, a sojourner upon earth; a creature of a day, but just launching out into an unchangeable state. Make haste. Eternity is at hand. Eternity depends on this moment; an eternity of happiness or an eternity of misery![3]

Another fuel to the passion for evangelism was the realisation that the gospel was the one way for a person to be saved. Wesley said, "The Son of God, who came from heaven, is here showing us the way to heaven; to the place

2. John Wesley, "Minutes of Several Conversations between the Rev. Mr. Wesley and others from the 1744, to the year 1789," *The Works of John Wesley,* Vol. VIII, *Addresses, Essays, and Letters* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1984 reprint from the 1872 edition), 310. Quotations from this fourteen-volume edition of *The Works of Wesley* will hereafter be referenced simply as *Works.*

3. Wesley, "Awake, Thou that Sleepeth," Sermon III, *Works,* Vol. V, 29.

which he hath prepared for us; the glory he had before the world began. He is teaching us the true way to life everlasting; the royal way which leads to the kingdom; and the only true way,—for there is none besides; all other paths lead to destruction."[4] Wesleyan passion, then, comes from a realisation of the urgency of the gospel.[5] Francis Asbury, whom John Wesley sent with Thomas Coke to start the Methodist movement in North America, wrote, "Preach as if you had seen heaven and its celestial inhabitants and had hovered over the bottomless pit and beheld the tortures and heard the groans of the damned."[6]

We see this kind of passion in Paul's attitude towards his fellow-Jews who had rejected the gospel: "... I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart. For I could wish that I myself were accursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my brothers, my kinsmen according to the flesh" (Rom. 9:1-3). There is a view among some theologians that God has one plan for the salvation of the nations and another for those who grew up among God's covenant people (Jews and Christians). In this view unreached people will be saved without reference to the gospel. Contrary to that view, Paul is seen describing the pre-conversion state of the Gentile Ephesians as follows: "...you were at that time separated from Christ, alienated from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world (Eph. 2:12).

After a long argument in Romans 1-3 to demonstrate that "all, both Jews and Greeks, are under sin" (Rom. 3:10), Paul says, "for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Rom. 3:23). The solution is to be "justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ

4. Wesley, "Upon our Lord's Sermon on the Mount," Sermon XXI, *Works,* Vol. V, 248.

5. On the passion for evangelism in Methodism, see, Robert E. Coleman, *Nothing to do But to Save Souls* (Nappance, IN: Evangel Publishing House, 1990).

6. Francis Asbury, *The Journal and Letters of Francis Asbury, vol. 2* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1958), 785; cited in Robert E. Coleman, *The Heart of the Gospel: The Theology behind the Master Plan of Evangelism* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2011), 83.

Jesus…, to be received by faith" (3:24). Later he would argue that, in order to have this faith that saves, it is necessary for people to hear the gospel through a preacher who has been sent to them (10:9-15).

We rejoice that attitudes of superiority that Christians may have had about those of other faiths are generally condemned in the church today. We approach all people with humility and treat them with respect recognising the good that may be found in their beliefs and behaviour. But we live with the realisation that people are lost apart from Christ. That drives us to proactive evangelism even though this may run counter to the prevailing mood of religious pluralism that frowns upon the idea of people being converted through believing in the gospel.

Wesley was also driven by the realisation that the gospel must be taken to the whole world. His famous quotation "the world is my parish" became a rallying point for Methodist missions. When Dr. Thomas Coke (1747-1814) was dismissed from his duties as Anglican parish priest in South Petherton because of his Wesleyan leanings he is reported to have gone to John Wesley. He asked what he was to do now that he had neither parish nor church. Wesley, taking Coke's hand in his, replied, "Why, go and preach the gospel to all the world."[7] He took those words to heart and later became the father of Methodist missions, ending his life on a ship carrying the first Methodist missionaries to Sri Lanka.

The words of W. E. Sangster, given at the World Methodist Conference of 1951, are as appropriate today as they were over half a century ago:

> Are we failing this age… in not bringing that passion to religion which it surely requires? [Methodists] offer the world nothing new in doctrine… our *raison d'être* [reason for existence] wasn't in novelty of doctrine, but in the conviction and passion we brought to its proclamation. *Religion in earnest!* What has happened to that awful earnestness which

7. John Vickers, *Thomas Coke: Apostle of Methodism* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1969), 131.

> fired Wesley and Asbury; John Nelson and Caleb Pedicord....[8]

John Wesley himself was an evangelist even before his Aldersgate experience. Following Peter Böhler's advice to him to preach faith until he got it, he did preach to a prisoner condemned to die and saw him go to the gallows with an assurance of salvation that he himself did not have![9] After Aldersgate, he kept a punishing preaching schedule and is reputed to have preached an average of two to three sermons a day for the next fifty-three years![10] Most of his published sermons served both the purposes of evangelism and nurture. With such a start from its founder, it is not surprising that evangelism would continue as a major feature of the life of the Methodist church.

2. The Evangelistic Message

2.1. Evangelism through power

The Methodist tradition of evangelism distinguished itself by its emphasis on the content of the gospel combined with a lively experiential element. The combination of warm heart and sound mind was seen in all its activities including its evangelism. Wesley was very much of an apologist arguing, in his sermons, for the truths he proclaimed and answering objections to these truths.[11] This was like the situation in the early church where the evangelistic sermons of Peter, Stephen and Paul in Acts were heavily doctrinal and apologetic in style. Interestingly in the early church the miracle workers were also apologists,

8. Frank Cumbers, editor, *Daily Readings from W. E. Sangster* (London: Epworth Press, 1966), 241. What we call the World Methodist Conference today was called the "Ecumenical Methodist Conference" in those days. This talk was given at the eighth such conference.

9. John Wesley, *Works,* Vol. I, *Journals,* No. I, 27 March 1738, 90.

10. Robert G. Tuttle, *On Giant Shoulders: The History, Role, and Influence of the Evangelist in the Movement Called Methodism* (Nashville: Discipleship Resources, 1984), 2.

11. ee John Sungschul Hong, *John Wesley: The Evangelist* (Lexington, KY: Emeth Press, 2006), chapter 12, "Apologetic Evangelism," 163-177.

a combination rarely found today.[12] But this was seen in Methodism, at least in the early stages of the revival where the preaching of the Word was accompanied by spectacular physical evidence of the work of the Holy Spirit as people came under the conviction of sin.

This combination of power and theological content has enormous implications for the church in Sri Lanka. Today many who have converted to Christianity in Sri Lanka have been attracted to the gospel through the demonstration of signs and wonders in answer to prayer. Sadly, the accompanying message which is preached often focusses primarily on the power of God and its ability to meet felt needs. There isn't the arguing for the truth of the gospel that was seen in Wesley's preaching. Certainly, Wesley's western linear logical style of argumentation may not be very effective in our eastern cultures. We must find culturally appropriate means of communication that our people use communicating truth. These means should work with the aim of helping persuade them to change their way of thinking to accommodate the Christian worldview. The verb "to persuade" (*peithō*), is used seven times in Acts to describe Paul's evangelism (17:4; 18:4; 19:8; 19:26; 26:28; 28:23, 24; cf. 2 Cor. 5:11).[13] This use of *peithō* has been defined as "to convince someone to believe something and to act on the basis of what is recommended."[14] People change their mind and align themselves with Christ. The key is to communicate the full Christian gospel which includes the creation, the fall, redemption and consummation through the work of Christ along with a kingdom-of-God understanding to life and to personal and social ethics.

Could evangelism in the Methodist Church demonstrate the possibility of combining these two aspects

12. See Ajith Fernando, *Acts: The NIV Application Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998), 147, 248-249.

13. It appeared 6 times in Acts before chapter 17, but 17:4 is the first time it appears in connection with Paul's evangelism.

14. Johannes P. Louw and Eugene A. Nida, editors, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament: Based on Semantic Domains.* Vol. 1 (New York: United Bible Societies, 1989), 423.

in our evangelistic strategy: arresting attention through demonstrating the power of God and persuasion through communicating the full content of the gospel? If the church does not fix this anomaly, soon we could have an influx of people into the church who do not understand what Christianity is all about. These people would have replaced their gods with the supreme, almighty God of the Christians without giving up their essentially magical understanding of deity. That view needs to be transformed to an approach that views God as holy-love and therefore as the One who seeks a relationship with us of adoption as his children and of submission to his lordship. This is a relationship that encompasses all of life.

2.2. Social concern and the evangelistic message

We also need to mention that the large majority of converts to Christianity in Sri Lanka in recent years have been from uneducated and economically poor backgrounds, resulting in the accusation that Christian evangelists are preying on the needs of people and bribing them into becoming Christians through the offering of allurements. As never before, the social ministries of the church need to be kept distinct from its evangelistic ministries, so that no connection is seen between the aid offered to non-Christians and the appeal to yield to the Lordship of Christ. People must be helped whether they become Christians or not. It would be better not to connect our evangelistic programmes with programmes of a humanitarian nature.

This is a difficult and somewhat unnatural distinction to maintain. In the Bible, social concern and evangelism are both presented as important segments of our mission; so, there is no theological basis for making such a sharp distinction between the two. But today in Sri Lanka we need to work hard at making this distinction because of the present hostile charges regarding evangelism and because of the attempts to make evangelism through "allurements" an illegal activity.

We also note that often the poor and hungry have lost a sense of pride in their self-worth and identity, including their religious identity. Therefore, changing religions for economic gain is very easy for them—too easy. This must make us cautious about giving people the impression that becoming Christians and receiving aid is the answer to overcoming their poverty. It is heartening to note in this regard that many of those who have converted to Christ from other faiths were previously devout adherents of their faith and that their conversion was the culmination of a quest for authentic spirituality. They did not come seeking material gain; they came seeking the Saviour of the world. I arrived at this conclusion after interviewing several first-generation Christians in Sri Lanka.

2.3. Evangelism among the business community

We are seeing some non-Christians from the business world in Sri Lanka converting to Christianity in the Charismatic churches, but not so much in the Methodist Church. I do not know whether a study has been done of the reasons for this. I have ministered often in these charismatic churches and have close connections with their leaders. I suspect that there are three reasons for this attraction. The first is the business style culture within these churches with a heavy emphasis on slick programming, high quality contemporary music, strategic planning, and ambitious vision-casting. This is an organisational culture that is much closer to the culture in the business world.

There are some obvious shortcomings in this approach to ecclesiastical culture as it seems to foster a consumerist approach to church-life. This runs counter to the biblical approach to community life which sees the church as a body and as a family. That requires long-term commitment as opposed to the present consumerist practice of church-hopping based on what each church has to offer.

However, this emphasis on quality and aggressive visionary programming is a challenge to us. The poor

quality of many Methodist programmes is, in my opinion, a great dishonour to God. Sadly, we do not seem to have a structure to call those responsible for poor quality to account. The newer churches have a more open-market, competitive approach to motivation which results in those who do not produce high quality work being penalised and deprived of promotions and of increased financial remuneration by pastoring in larger churches. I believe there are biblical grounds to support our ecclesiastical structures; however, without a burning passion for the glory of God, our structures could result in mediocre and low-quality programming. Passion is the biblical alternative to motivation via free market competition, and that, as we saw, is a key aspect of the Methodist heritage! How important it is for us to recover our burning passion.

A second reason why the newer churches are attracting people from the business world is the passionate concern members must witness to their friends in the business world. Their witness and concern often meet the felt need for a place of security amidst the stresses and other challenges faced in the business world. High quality programmes, as in the business world, are organised which present facets of Christian truth in ways that are relevant to businesspersons. There is much that we can learn from this emphasis on personal concern for and relevant witness to colleagues and of planning high quality programmes that attract people from the business world.

A third reason is the message proclaimed. There is much merit and biblical authenticity in the content of the evangelical message proclaimed in these churches. But there is also a danger. The prosperity gospel that is proclaimed in some churches is appealing to people who have already adopted a free market philosophy of life. In these churches there is a danger that other aspects of Christian discipleship, such as the essentiality of suffering and a commitment to justice, could be neglected. These topics could turn off visitors from the business world. But to present this lopsided gospel is dangerous because people could be attracted to Christianity without realising that

following Christ includes suffering and a commitment to justice. So, we may find Christians who are active in their churches but whose business establishments are guilty of under-paying workers, of adopting unethical advertising methods and of exploiting the poor and needy.

When Paul spoke to the Athenians he said, "And he made from one man every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth" (Acts 17:26). This idea of the entire human race coming out of one stock ran counter to the belief of the Athenians who prided themselves as having come from a separate stock to others.[15] Paul was not afraid to attack this prejudice in his evangelistic message even though this could have a hostile reception from his hearers. The Methodist movement has always been committed to justice. And this commitment should be expressed in its evangelistic proclamation also. The American pastor-theologian James Montgomery Boice has been credited with the statement that what you win them *by* you win them *to*. An evangelistic message without a justice element can result in Christians who condone injustice.

2.4. Evangelism among intellectuals

The failure to make a significant evangelistic impact upon intellectual non-Christians is a glaring fact about the church in Sri Lanka today. The religions of Sri Lanka have a strong intellectual heritage which must not be ignored by the church. Possibly the forms of evangelism commonly used in the church today are not very effective with intellectuals. Perhaps we need a contemporary equivalent to the Methodist Evangelist E. Stanley Jones (1884-1973) who was able to win a hearing among the intellectuals of India. He would give "Christ- and gospel-centered lecture-sermons on current topics… in hired public halls… mostly for non-Christians, under the chairmanship of some local

15. F. F. Bruce, *The Book of Acts,* Revised Edition, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids and Cambridge: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1988), 337.

leader."[16] The meetings did not have the usual trappings of an evangelistic meeting (such as prayer and songs of praise and proclamation). After the meetings, there would be "gruelling question periods."[17] In connection with these meetings or independent of them Jones would organise round table conferences where people were able to dialogue on matters of faith and life. This approach is well expressed in his Jones' book *Christ at the Round Table.*[18]

Jones was following the method used by Paul when ministering among the intellectual Athenians. Paul "reasoned [or dialogued; Gk. *dielegeto*] in the synagogue with the Jews and the devout persons, and in the marketplace every day with those who happened to be there" (Act 17:17). While Paul dialogued with the people, he did not compromise on the radical nature of the call of God and on the uniqueness of Christ. He boldly proclaimed these in his address at the Areopagus and lost some of his audience as a result (Acts 17:31-32). Some who have emphasised the need for dialogue today have jettisoned their belief in the absolute uniqueness of Christ. This was not so for Jones who, to the end, presented Christ as supreme and taught the need for conversion.[19] As far as I know, Wesley did not participate in formal verbal dialogues like Jones. But his sermons, letters and articles show that he engaged those who had views different to his and sought to respond to them biblically.

Sri Lanka needs more evangelists in the mould of

16. James K. Mathews, "Jones, Eli Stanley," *A Dictionary of Asian Christianity,* Scott W. Sunquist, editor (Grand Rapids and Cambridge: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2001), 424.

17. James K. Mathews, "E(li) Stanley Jones," *Biographical Dictionary of Christian Missions,* Gerald H. Anderson, editor, (Grand Rapids and Cambridge: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1998), 339.

18. See E. Stanley Jones, *Christ at the Round Table* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1928). On the contribution of Jones, see Richard W. Taylor, *The Contribution of E. Stanley Jones* (Madras: Christian Literature Society, 1973) and Richard W. Taylor, "E. Stanley Jones, 1884-1973, Following the Christ of the Indian Road," *Mission Legacies: Biographical Studies of Leaders of the Modern Missionary Movement,* Gerald Anderson, et. al. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1994), 339-347.

19. E. Stanley Jones, *Conversion* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1959).

Stanley Jones. May leaders within the Methodist Church encourage and nurture those who may have gifts suited for this work. In addition, every Methodist leader should be asking how they could effectively answer the queries of our nation's intellectuals. It is interesting to note that a description of the ministry of Stanley Jones by his son-in-law Bishop James K. Mathews (1913-2010), says that he "wrestled with the problem of human suffering."[20] He even wrote a book on it.[21] Given how important this issue is to the Buddhists, anyone doing evangelism among intellectuals in Sri Lanka should also give serious thought to this issue.

3. Nurturing New Believers: "The Chief Care"

Less than five years after his Aldersgate experience, Wesley records in his journal about how many who professed faith have fallen away. Then he describes the danger of people being allowed to fall away without proper nurture: "From the terrible instances I met with here, (and indeed in all parts of England,) I am more and more convinced, that the devil himself desires nothing more than this, that the people of any place should be half-awakened, and then left to themselves to fall asleep again." This is followed by his famous statement: "*Therefore I determine, by the grace of God, not to strike one stroke in any place where I cannot follow the blow*."[22] Wesley described the nurture of new believers as "the chief care." He says, "We must build with one hand, while we fight with the other. And this is the great work, not only to bring souls to believe in Christ, but to build them up in our most holy faith. How grievously are they mistaken who imagine that, as soon as the children are born, they need take no more care of them! We do not find it so. *The chief care then begins*."[23]

20. Mathews, *Dictionary of Asian Christianity,* 425.

21. E. Stanley Jones, *Christ and Human Suffering* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1933).

22. Wesley, *Works,* Vol. I, *Journals,* No. V, 13 March 1743, 416 (italics ours).

23. Wesley, *Works,* Vol. XIII, *Letters,* DCCIV, 23 (italics ours).

Like in Wesley's time, many of those who have joined the church in Sri Lanka are from economically and educationally deprived backgrounds. There are two aspects of Wesley's system of nurturing new believers which I believe are especially relevant to our church. They are Wesley's system of small groups and the use of hymns for teaching doctrine.

3.1. Class Meetings and Bands[24]

Though there have been a lot of people who have entered the church from other faiths, developing Christian values among new believers has been a challenge for all churches doing evangelism among people of other faiths. For example, though Christianity teaches that believers do not lie, many do! This is a carry-over from their previous life where, even though they would daily recite that they will abstain from lying, lying is very much part of the Sri Lankan culture. This has forged an attitude that, though the holy books should be revered and defended, they cannot be practiced. Therefore, converts come to the church with a worldview that says that one does not have to practice all the ethical teachings of the scriptures.

We need to develop an approach that looks to the teachings of the Bible with a desire to obey and with a belief that obedience is possible and mandatory. As Wesley said, "God's design in raising up preachers called Methodists" was "Not to form any new sect; but to reform the nation, particularly the Church; and to spread scriptural holiness over the land."[25] It should come as no surprise that the Methodist movement was soon called "the Holiness Movement."

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24. Much of the material here is from my article, "Wesley's Small Groups as Keys to Nurturing Godliness among Converts from Economically Poorer Backgrounds, A Case Study from Sri Lanka" in Darrell L. Whiteman and Gerald H. Anderson, Editors, *World Mission in the Wesleyan Spirit,* American Society of Missiology Series, No. 44 (Franklin, TN: Providence House Publishers, 2009), 235-243.

25. Wesley, *Works, Addresses, Essays, and Letters,* vol. 8, 299.

The situation is complicated in Sri Lanka because generally right and wrong are evaluated based on whether a given action produces shame or honour within the community rather than whether it makes one guilty before a holy God. The guilt orientation gives a more *personal* awareness of sin which acts as an incentive to holiness. Shame and honour are more *community-oriented* values. The Bible is alert to this issue as the cultures to which it was written were also shame-and-honour oriented.[26]

I believe that Wesley's system of four interlocking groups will help in the nurturing of holy believers in a culture like ours. I have found the description of these groups by Michael Henderson helpful.[27]

The first group is *the society* that met on Sunday. Henderson describes this as operating in the *cognitive mode*. The preaching/teaching of the Word took place weekly in the society meeting.

The second group is *the class meeting*. This was a heterogeneous group consisting of men and women, young and old, and rich and poor members usually from the same geographical area. This operated in what Henderson calls the *behavioural mode* and there the truths of scripture were applied to daily life.

Even today, when members are actively involved in discussing the implications of scripture for daily life in a small group setting, there is a greater chance of Christian values being internalised than through a traditional talk. As the truth is internalised, new criteria for shame and honour

26. For a description of shame-honour cultures and their relationship to the Bible see Joseph Plevnik, "Honor/Shame," *Biblical Social Values and their Meanings,* edited by John J. Pilch and Bruce J. Malina (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1993), 95-104; Bruce J. Malina, *The New Testament World: Insights from Cultural Anthropology* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), 27-57; Roland Muller, *Honor and Shame: Unlocking the Door* (Xlibris, 2000). Timothy F. Tennant, *Theology in the Context of World Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007), 77-101; and Hannes Wiher. *Shame and Guilt: A Key to Cross-Cultural Ministry.* Bonn: Verlag für Kultür und Wissenschaft, 2003.

27. D. Michael Henderson, *John Wesley's Class Meeting: A Model for Making Disciples* (Nappanee, IN: Evangel Publishing House, 1997).

could be forged within the church community. In this way scriptural values, such as truthfulness in conversation, are encouraged through truthfulness becoming an honourable value and lying becoming a shameful value. Paul adopted this approach often when pushing for Christian values. He presented different behaviours as honourable or shameful. He said that sexual sin "*must not even be named* among you as *is proper* among the saints" (Eph. 5:3); that filthiness, foolish talk and crude joking was "*out of place"* (Eph. 5:4); and that "*it is shameful* to even speak about things they do in secret" (Eph. 5:12). When rebuking the Corinthians for unholy behaviour, he said, "I say this to *your shame*" (1 Cor. 15:34; see also 2 Thess. 3:14). In all these cases Paul was forging community values using honour and shame to foster holiness.

Many of today's small groups do not really grapple with the text of scripture and with how to apply it to daily life. Usually, today's meetings have times of praise (called "worship"), testimony, praying for the needs of people and a short "devotional." We are missing a good opportunity to foster holy living among Christians. We would do well to return to Wesley's approach to small groups as aimed at bringing behavioural changes through applying the scriptures.

Wesley's third group was *the band.* Henderson describes it as belonging to the *affective mode*.[28] (The fourth group *the specialised band,* for groups like backsliders and recovering alcoholics, will not be considered here as it does not apply directly to this paper. Henderson calls this as belonging to the *rehabilitative mode.* It could be considered a precursor to modern group therapy). Wesley's "Rules of the Bands" begin with the words: "The design of our meeting is to obey the command of God, 'Confess your faults to one another, and pray for one another that ye may be healed' (Jas. 5:16)."[29] Wesley recommends questions to ask about the personal life. This was what we today call a personal accountability group. So, the band was a homogenous group

28. Ibid., 112.
29. Ibid, 117.

consisting of the same kind of people—young men, or young women, or adult men, or adult women etc.

For three decades, I have been preaching about the need for Christian leaders to have these kinds of accountability relationships and I have even written a book trying to apply Wesley's system of friendships to today's world.[30] The constant response I get from leaders is that they cannot trust people enough to talk to them about their weaknesses and sins. Many describe how they have tried to do this and got hurt through the betrayal of trust. I am convinced that we need to create a new culture where people will trust each other so as to be willing to be vulnerable before them.

For such a culture we need a fresh understanding of grace. Grace tells us that we are all sinners, but that God has done all that is necessary for our sins to be forgiven and forgotten. If we have such a strong sense of grace, we would not be afraid to bring up our sins before trusted people. Those who hear of such sins would not go gossiping about them because they themselves know that their own identity in Christ is only because of grace that was showered upon them despite their sinfulness. For a forgiven sinner to gossip about the sins of others would be the height of hypocrisy. When a person with the grace perspective looks at the failings of another Christian, his or her main concern is, "How can I help this person recover from this?" This grace perspective pervades the New Testament which is unafraid to highlight the sins and weaknesses of the key leaders of the early church.[31] Only Jesus is presented as being without sin. Biblical Christians are afraid of sin, but not afraid to accept that they have sinned, because they believe that grace is able to heal them after sin.

In a church where there is a corporate quest for applying the scriptures and where there is a mutual up-

30. Ajith Fernando, *Reclaiming Friendship: Relating to Each other in a Frenzied World* (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 1991; Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 1993).

31. See Ajith Fernando, *Jesus Driven Ministry* (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 2002), 134-152

building of Christians through accountability we can achieve the kind of attitudes that will nurture holy people who follow the scriptures in their daily lives. Shame and honour cultures have a strong sense of community solidarity. But that does not usually extend to spiritual accountability for one's personal behaviour. Modern-day equivalents of class meetings and bands can help foster such spiritual accountability.

My ministry in Youth for Christ and at the Nugegoda Methodist Church has been primarily with first generation Christians who are relatively new converts. It has become clear from this experience that those who grew to biblical maturity are those who belonged to a Bible study group and submitted to spiritual accountability. There is a great need for the Methodist Church in Sri Lanka to recover this vital aspect of our heritage if we wish for our evangelism to be truly biblical.

3.2. Hymns as a means of evangelism and nurture

A second distinctive of the nurture of new believers among the early Methodists that I want to discuss was their use of hymns to teach the doctrines of the church. Charles Wallace says that "field preaching and hymn-singing" are "arguably the best known and most important of the Methodist revival's contributions to the wider church."[32] Hymn singing was so much a part of the Methodist revival that some Methodist Hymn books began with the statement, "Methodism was born in Song,"[33] a sentiment also expressed in the official British Methodist website.[34] There is a significant fact about this that is stated in an influential book on English hymnody written almost a

32. Charles B. Wallace Jr., "Wesley as Revivalist/Renewal Leader," in *The Cambridge Companion to John Wesley* edited by Randy L. Maddox and Jason E. Vickers (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 91

33. *The Methodist Hymn Book* (London: The Methodist Publishing House, 1933), v.

34. http://www.methodist.org.uk/who-we-are/what-is-distinctive-about-methodism/born-in-song

century ago. Louis Benson says that the Methodist hymns were "the result of the Revival experiences with the poor and unlettered."[35] The early Methodist leaders realised that with poorer, semiliterate people, hymns were a good way to communicate gospel truth and Christian doctrine. Many people from similar backgrounds are coming to Christ in Sri Lanka in the Methodist Church and other churches. So hymns could be a key to proclaiming the gospel and to nurturing new believers in Sri Lanka also.

In his Preface to his hymn book published in 1780 Wesley said, "The hymns are not carelessly jumbled together, but carefully ranged under proper heads, according to the experience of real Christians. So that this book is in effect *a little body of experimental and practical divinity*."[36] It was a book of theology. This kind of topical arrangement of hymns was a new development in English hymnody, though around the same time Evangelical Anglicans John Newton (1725-1807) and William Cowper (1731-1800) also published a topically arranged hymnbook called *Olney Hymns*.[37] As Beckerlegge says, "By means of the hymns the Methodist people were not only brought to religious convictions: they came to understand their Bibles better, a secure foundation of evangelical theology was laid in their minds, and they were built up in the Christian faith."[38] In other words, hymns were tools in evangelism among unbelievers and in the nurture of new believers. They were able to take Christian beliefs to the heart of an individual. Wesley said, "Singing is as much the language

35. Louis F. Benson, *The English Hymn* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1915), 248; cited by Oliver A. Beckerlegge, in the "Introduction" to the Bicentennial edition of *The Works of John Wesley,* vol. 7, *A Collection of Hymns for the Use of The People Called Methodists,* edited by Franz Hildebrandt and Oliver A. Beckerlegge (Nashville: Abingdon Press, originally published in 1983 by Oxford University Press), 62. This edition will hereinafter be referred to as the Bicentennial edition.

36. Wesley in *Works,* vol. 7, *Hymns,* Bicentennial edition, 74 (italics ours).

37. Beckerlegge, in the "Introduction" to *Works* vol. 7, Bicentennial edition, 27.

38. Ibid., 61-62.

of holy joy, as praying is of holy desire."[39] He knew that the experience of singing would be a good way for people to learn and remember doctrines. Many of them were not educated or literate, so they would find it difficult to learn doctrine through the more traditional types of formal education.

Up to this point, congregational singing was not common in the Church of England. It was the Methodists, the Congregationalist Isaac Watts (1674-1748) and the Moravians who popularised congregational singing.[40] Karen Westerfield Tucker says, "The catechetical and evangelical functions of the hymn texts were aided by familiar tunes or new tunes in current styles."[41] Musicologist, Donald Hustad says, "The Wesleys must be credited with rescuing hymn singing from the bondage of the two-line meters—common long and short. Their sources were the newer psalm tunes, opera melodies, and folk songs of German origin."[42] They used popular melodies. The genius of Christianity is its ability to make people of any culture at home in the church by adapting the practice of Christianity to the culture of the people. Therefore, our worship takes forms which are close to the people so that they can worship with their heart.

Wesley disliked complicated tunes which were artistically advanced but made the words difficult to understand. One out of many references in his journal about this will suffice: "A long anthem was sung; but I suppose none beside the singers could understand one word of it. Is not that 'praying in an unknown tongue?' I could no more bear it in any church of mine, than Latin prayers."[43]

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39. John Wesley, *Explanatory Notes upon the Old Testament,* Vol. 1, 248). (Bristol: William Pine, 1765), 248; on Exod. 15:1 (from the electronic edition).

40. Karen B. Westerfield Tucker, "Wesley's Emphasis on Worship and the Means of Grace," in *The Cambridge Companion to John Wesley,* 231.

41. Ibid., 232.

42. Donald P. Hustad, "Music in the Modern Revivalist Tradition," *Music and Arts in Christian Worship, The Complete Library of Christian Worship, vol. 4* (Nashville: Star Song Publishing Group, 1994), 229.

43. *Works* Vol. IV, Journal, March 19, 1778, 116; see also Ibid., April 8, 1787, 367; Ibid., Jan. 25, 1781, 196;

As Tucker explains, "Nothing was to compromise the clear expression and hearing of the text."[44]

There is a lesson here for the church in Sri Lanka. We must have hymns presenting our theology that can be sung in tunes that our people find easy to sing. The third and fourth generation Christians in our churches are comfortable with singing translated hymns with western tunes, but the newer converts struggle to sing them meaningfully. There is a need for fresh translations of our classic hymns and of fresh compositions of hymns communicating our doctrines. And the tunes used for these need not be in the typical western meter but tunes that are more in keeping with contemporary local tastes. Recently we have seen some such Sinhala hymns emerge that present the doctrines of creation, the power of God, incarnation and redemption. But there are too few that teach on subjects like scriptural holiness, pilgrimage, engagement in mission and in society, and eschatology. I think Tamil hymnody is more advanced in this area. The challenge is to organise our services and meetings so as to consciously use the singing to impart Christian theology. I believe a one or two sentence introduction is all that may be needed to get the people doctrinally oriented to reap a doctrinal harvest from the song. The worship service must not only be culturally relevant, but it must also be the result of serious theological thinking by those preparing it.

Wesley wanted all Methodists to sing in church and at home. He says that his collection of hymns published in 1780 was done in such a way that it would "neither… be cumbersome nor expensive"[45] so that individual Methodists could purchase a copy. Today's use of PowerPoint and overhead projectors may result in people not being familiar with the hymnbook. We should encourage the people to have a personal hymnbook at home and to use it regularly. In my travels, one book I always take with me is my British Methodist hymnbook to use in my personal devotions (even though I cannot use this hymnbook in my ministry

44. Tucker, "Wesley's Emphasis," 233.
45. Wesley, *Hymns,* 73.

with Sinhala speaking people). It has been said that in those days "Methodist homes could be identified by the sound of singing."[46]

Karen Tucker points out that "John Wesley was insistent that singing in worship was to be done by the entire congregation."[47] So in his "Directions for Singing" issued in 1761, he urges the people to "Learn these tunes" and "Sing them *exactly*."[48] He did not want the people to struggle with an unfamiliar tune during worship. In keeping with this idea, if I am using a new tune at a worship service, I usually rehearse it with the congregation just before the service. Interestingly, "Wesley vehemently rejected for Methodist worship the use of choirs and choral anthems—what was then common practice in the Church of England."[49] This is because such practices took the focus in singing away from the congregation to a special group of people.

Wesley also directed Methodists to "sing *lustily* and with a good courage." So that all may sing with fervour, he did not want some to "bawl, so as to be heard above or distinct from the rest of the congregation." He felt that this would detract from the "harmony" in which the whole congregation makes "one clear melodious sound."[50] This too is very relevant today. When contemporary so-called "worship songs" are sung, often the musical instruments and the voices of the worship leaders are so loud that they drown out the singing of the congregation. That could lull the worshippers to an unhelpful passivity. This way, we may miss the benefit of the congregation effectively learning theology through active involvement in singing hymns.

Today's "worship revolution" has brought in much vibrancy and freedom in worship to Christians. But it may be missing the opportunity to teach a theologically

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46. Coleman, *Nothing to do But to Save Souls,* 28
47. Tucker, "Wesley's Emphasis," 232.
48. "Wesley's Directions for Singing," 1761; reprinted in Wesley, *Works,* vol. 7 *Hymns,* Bicentennial edition, 765 (italics his).
49. Tucker, "Wesley's Emphasis," 232.
50. "Wesley's Directions," 765.

starved people the great doctrines of the church. A return to using hymns as a means of theological instruction may help give vitally needed nourishment to the people and help stabilise those who have recently come to Christ. But if this is to happen, we will have to set about the task with the same creativity and commitment that the early Methodist movement did. We will have to look for ways of singing that are so culturally close to our people so that they could, as Wesley once said, "sing with the spirit and the understanding also."[51] It is my firm belief that we need to do some serious thinking about the use of hymns in worship in the Methodist Church in Sri Lanka today.

4. Conclusion

The following main affirmations and proposals are commended to the Methodist Church in Sri Lanka.

Firstly, passion was a major characteristic of Methodism and was fuelled by a realisation of the lostness of people apart from Christ and a confidence in the gospel as the answer to human need. We must recapture that vision.

Secondly, our evangelism needs to include both the demonstration of the power of God through prayer and the persuasion of people to accept the full Christian gospel through content-oriented communication.

Thirdly, we must be careful not to give the impression that our evangelism includes material incentives that allure people to become Christians.

Fourthly, we are rebuked by our lack of high-quality programming that has resulted in relatively less outsiders from the business world coming to our churches. While developing high quality programmes and a passion for businesspeople, we must not neglect the justice elements of the Christian message which challenge many in the business world.

Fifthly, the church is insufficiently engaging the intellectuals of our nation. We need to look for people

51. Wesley, *Works*, Vol. III, *Journals,* No. XV, 10 Aug. 1768, 339.

and models to do so and all Christian leaders need to acquaint themselves with the issues relating to evangelising intellectuals.

Sixthly, in our shame-and-honour oriented culture, biblical truth could be internalised and new criteria for shame and honour could be forged through the application of scripture to daily life in our small groups (class meetings) and accountability groups (bands). This will nurture mature and holy people in the church.

Seventhly, we should explore new ways of using hymns to teach doctrine and nurture believers. We need to develop doctrinally loaded hymns with tunes that our people find easy to sing. The way we lead worship should encourage the congregation to sing without undue focus coming on the team that is leading worship.

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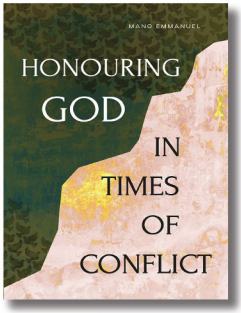

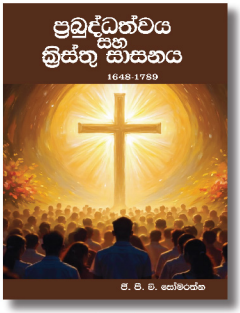

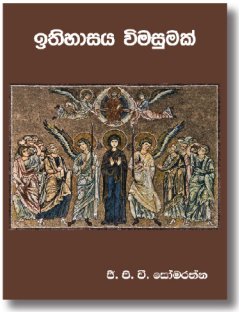

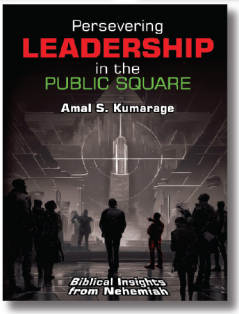

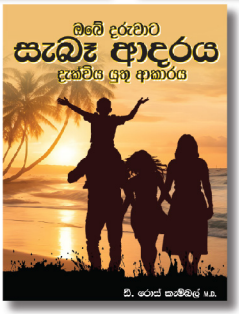

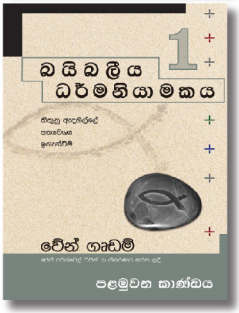

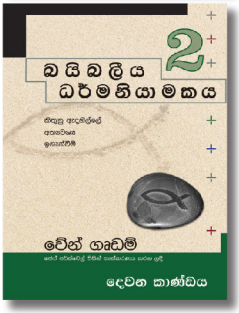

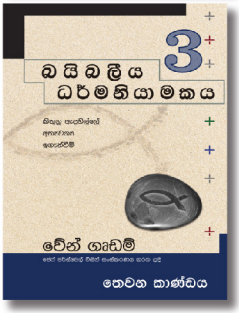

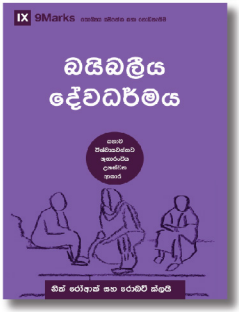

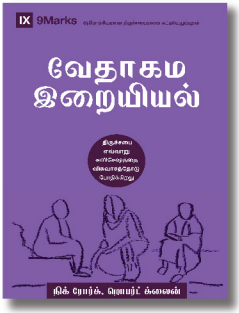

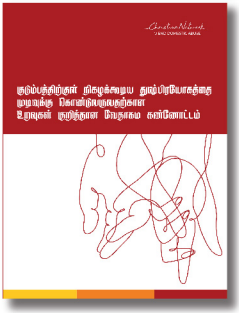

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