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## Reading Proverbs 1:1-7 Missionally

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### ABSTRACT

The Book of Proverbs in the Old Testament has not been taken seriously from a missionary perspective. One reason is that Proverbs does not contain elements of redemptive history that exist in other books, such as the covenant, temple, and Abraham's blessing. However, I claim that Proverbs can be considered a missiological book. Firstly, the book borrows the culture and wisdom of other countries to create Israel's own wisdom. Secondly, Proverbs clearly presents general revelation that can be applied to other cultures. God is proclaiming his revelation and salvation through the culture and traditions of human society. The contents of Proverbs can be seen appearing similarly in other countries' cultures and traditions. In particular, we can learn about God's general revelation through a comparative analysis of Korean traditional proverbs with the Book of Proverbs. Thirdly, Proverbs emphasizes the ethical aspect of missionary work. It provides missionary insight into how the redeemed people live among other peoples and cultures. In addition, it emphasizes the mission of stewardship in the relationship with nature, animals, and plants, and this is due to the creation theology that all living things were created by God. So, we can read Proverbs 1:1-7 from a missional hermeneutic. We can see the big picture of God's mission and how different parts of the Bible contribute to the grand story. Lastly, Proverbs can be effectively used as a tool for missions to various communities where evangelism is difficult.

### KEYWORDS

Proverbs, wisdom, culture, general revelation, Korean proverbs, creation theology, ethics, community, mission.

### INTRODUCTION

Can the Book of Proverbs be read missionally? While numerous scholars have examined the Old Testament from a missional perspective, I insist that Proverbs, a significant work of wisdom literature, had not yet been thoroughly explored.

The Book of Proverbs in the Old Testament has not been taken seriously from a missionary perspective. One reason is that Proverbs does not contain elements of redemptive history that exist in other books, such as the covenant, temple, and Abraham's blessing.

However, the Book of Proverbs communicates God's mission of cultivating wisdom and discipline for a fulfilling life in one's family and community. It also shapes communities for participation in God's ongoing redemptive witness.

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This project will offer a missional reading of Proverbs 1:1–7. Such a reading is beneficial because, first, the Proverbs borrowed the culture and wisdom of other countries and created Israel's own wisdom. Second, it clearly presents a general revelation that can be applied to other cultures. Third, it emphasizes the ethical aspect of missionary work, which provides missionary insight into how the redeemed people live among other peoples and cultures. Finally, it can be a powerful tool for mission work in various communities where direct mission work may not be possible.

My focus was primarily on Proverbs 1:1–7, although I also referenced other sections relevant to missions. First, I would like to explore missional hermeneutics. Next, I will examine the relationship between Proverbs and the cultures of surrounding nations. Then, I will investigate the general revelation of how the teachings of Proverbs can be applied to other cultures, especially Korean proverbs. Furthermore, I will explore the concept of community and its importance in participating in God's mission. Finally, I aim to reveal the missional implications of Proverbs as a powerful tool for missionary work in regions where the gospel has difficulty penetrating. I will conclude with a summary that synthesizes all the insights gained from previous writings and presents recommendations.

## MISSIONAL HERMENEUTICS

First, I would like to explore missional hermeneutics. The methods of reading the Bible have changed. During the premodern era, subjective approaches to reading the Bible, such as for moral instruction, as a way of contemplation, or to support discipleship, were widespread. In the modern era, historical criticism rooted in logic and science gained prominence and it once became a standard to interpret the Bible. In the postmodern era, having a variety of interpretations is a crucial aspect in the academic world.

There are many ways to interpret the Bible,<sup>1</sup> but ultimately, I believe interpretation must be based on the Great Commandment (Deut. 6:5; Lev. 19:18; Matt. 22:36–40). It is important to note that Augustine's well-known interpretive principle of *caritas* (love) can offer a theological justification for interpreting the biblical text in a way that leads to a greater understanding and love of God and our fellow human beings. This principle serves as a criterion for accurate interpretation.<sup>2</sup> Also, we need to read the text with sensitivity to the dynamics of social systems and their impact on local communities both ancient and contemporary. At the same time, as Leticia A.

Guardiola-Saenz suggests, all interpretations are culturally mediated, reflecting the readers' social and cultural context. Therefore, the outcome of each interaction between the reader and the text is unique and never final.<sup>3</sup>

Historically, biblical hermeneutics has been developed by various scholars.<sup>4</sup> Due to the prevalence of pluralism in academia in the postmodern period, many perceive biblical interpretation to be subjective and unavoidably so. We have moved from a time when Scripture's meaning was apparent and discoverable through historical criticism, separate from faith, to an era of uncertainty and rampant pluralism where any interpretation is as valid as hundreds of others. While faith is still welcome, it is often relativized. Historical criticism posed a risk of limiting the Bible to the past, whereas postmodernism threatens to make it so contemporary that we only hear the "echoes of our own voices."<sup>5</sup>

As an alternative to this, instead of using the nineteenth-century Enlightenment model, a "conversation model" has been proposed which deals with questions and answers between the original meaning of the Bible and the contemporary context.<sup>6</sup> We should avoid assuming that we can separate what the Bible meant "back then" from what it means "now." I argue that the conversation model is more suitable for interpreting the Bible in the postmodern

3. Leticia A. Guardiola-Saenz, "Borderless Women and Borderless Texts: A Cultural Reading of Matthew 15:21–28," *Semeia*, no. 78 (1997): 71.

4. Biblical scholars have generated multiple interpretations. We can read the Bible from a variety of angles. For the unity of Scripture (unity is to look at Scripture's narrative unity with four big movements: Creation, Fall, Redemption, and Glory). See Ellen F. Davis and Richard B. Hays, *The Art of Reading Scripture* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2003). For spiritual reading, see Angela Lou Harvey, *Spiritual Reading: A Study of the Christian Practice of Reading Scripture* (Cambridge, England: James Clarke & Co, 2016). For feminist reading, see Jacqueline E. Lapsley, *Whispering the Word: Hearing Women's Stories in the Old Testament*, 1st ed. (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005). For minority reading, see Esau McCaulley, *Reading While Black: African American Biblical Interpretation as An Exercise in Hope* (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 2020). For ecological reading, see Ellen F. Davis, *Scripture, Culture, and Agriculture: An Agrarian Reading of the Bible* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009); David G. Horrell, *The Bible and the Environment: Towards a Critical Ecological Biblical Theology, Biblical Challenges in the Contemporary World* (New York: Routledge, 2014). For missional reading, the following books are helpful. Michael W. Goheen, *Reading the Bible Missionally, The Gospel and Our Culture Series* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2016); Richard Bauckham, *Bible and Mission: Christian Witness in A Postmodern World* (Carlisle, Cumbria, UK: Paternoster Press, 2003); Christopher J. H. Wright, *The Mission of God: Unlocking the Bible's Grand Narrative* (Downers Grove, Ill: IVP Academic, 2006); Walter C. Jr. Kaiser, *Mission in the Old Testament: Israel As a Light to the Nations* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2012); Johannes Nissen, *New Testament and Mission: Historical and Hermeneutical Perspectives*, 2nd ed. (Frankfurt am Main: P. Lang, 2002); Arthur F. Glasser, *Announcing the Kingdom: The Story of God's Mission in the Bible* (Grand Rapids, Mich: Baker Academic, 2003); Donald Senior, *The Biblical Foundations for Mission* (Maryknoll, N.Y: Orbis Books, 1983); Andreas J. Kostenberger, *Salvation to the Ends of the Earth: A Biblical Theology of Mission, New Studies in Biblical Theology 11* (Leicester, England: Apollos, 2001).

5. Craig G. Bartholomew et al., *Renewing Biblical Interpretation, Scripture and Hermeneutics series*, v. 1 (Carlisle, Cumbria, UK: Paternoster Press, 2000), xxv.

6. Joel B. Green, *Hearing the New Testament: Strategies for Interpretation* (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 1995), 329–330.

1. Richard B. Hays proposes seven exegesis criteria: "availability, volume, recurrence, thematic coherence, historical plausibility, history of interpretation, and satisfaction." Richard B. Hays, *Echoes of Scripture in the Letters of Paul*, New edition (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1993), 29–32.

2. Ellen F. Davis, *Scripture, Culture, and Agriculture: An Agrarian Reading of the Bible* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 3.

era because the original intention of the Bible is not fixed but can be changed or altered to a new meaning according to different contexts and times. Missional hermeneutics also emerged within such a contemporary context.

How do mission and theology of mission relate to biblical interpretation? Biblical scholars have yet to come to a consensus on the significance of mission for interpreting Scripture. One of the reasons for this is that the concept of mission has historically been variously defined. For a considerable period, the mission was used to describe the intentional efforts of the church to spread the Christian faith among unbelievers, particularly in foreign cultures and countries. This understanding of mission has historically made it difficult for biblical scholars to identify mission in the Old Testament, as few specific cross-cultural mission activities are recounted therein. Another tendency for identifying mission in the Bible has been to focus on “sending texts” such as the Great Commission in the New Testament, particularly the version in Matthew 28:18–20.<sup>7</sup>

Missiology and biblical scholarship have traditionally been divided regarding missional interpretation of the Bible, but recent trends indicate that a missional hermeneutic could now be appropriate. According to Michael Barram, this approach prioritizes the Christian community’s missiological “location” for interpreting Scripture in a critical and faithful way. Our personal situations, experiences, characteristics, and presuppositions inevitably influence our interpretation of the text.<sup>8</sup> For example, when Black Americans read the Bible, they tend to read and interpret it from their own perspective.<sup>9</sup> Asians read the Bible through Asian culture and traditions. That is why aspects such as the ideology of Confucianism are important to them. Martin Kähler stated that mission is “the mother of theology” by which he meant theology originated as a supporting manifestation of the Christian message. Bosch, who popularized Kähler’s dictum in his groundbreaking work, *Transforming Mission*, builds on this insight asserting that theology originally emerged as a natural part of the Christian mission. He argues that writers of the New Testament wrote the Scriptures “in the context of an ‘emergency’ situation” of a church which, because of its missionary encounter with the world, was forced to theologize.<sup>10</sup> In a similar fashion, Dana Robert mentions that the New Testament is not a systematic book of theology, but rather a book of missionary character in which early

Christians bear witness to what they had seen.<sup>11</sup>

What is a missional hermeneutic? Goheen introduces the three central aspects: “reading the whole Scripture with mission as a central theme, reading Scripture to understand what mission really is, and reading Scripture to equip the church for its missional task.”<sup>12</sup> Wright argues that missional hermeneutic means: (1) God’s purpose for his whole creation, including redemption and eschatology; (2) God’s purpose for human life; (3) God’s election of Israel; (4) the centrality of Jesus Christ; and (5) God’s calling of the church.<sup>13</sup> I would like to recommend a missionary reading of Proverbs from two perspectives. We read Proverbs, first, with mission as the central theme, and second, as God’s purpose for human life.

According to Bauckham, there are two methods that the Bible uses to lead us in a missional direction. First is a canonical hermeneutic, “a way of reading the Bible as a whole.” Second is a narrative hermeneutic, which means the Bible as a whole tells a God’s story. We need to read the Scripture with a canonical hermeneutic and a narrative hermeneutic (God’s story and our own stories).<sup>14</sup>

Wright also claims that we must read the Bible messianically and missionally. A missional reading of the Bible means a reading that explores its dynamic significance in God’s mission for Israel and the world and its relevance to the Christian mission today.<sup>15</sup> Adopting a missional hermeneutic can help reconcile the tension between theology and mission. In this way, we can read the Scripture holistically.

## GENERAL REVELATION

### Relationship with Other Cultures

Second, I insist that the Proverbs borrowed the culture and wisdom of other countries and created Israel’s own wisdom. Many scholars argue that the Book of Proverbs was greatly influenced by the culture and traditions of surrounding countries. Paul R. House claims that “Proverbs is a product of the ancient Near Eastern Wisdom tradition in general and the Israelite Wisdom tradition in particular.”<sup>16</sup> James B. Pritchard’s edited volume, *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament* (ANET). He claims, “The Egyptians delighted in compilations of wise sayings, which were

7. Series; No. 16 (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1991), 16–20; Michael Barram, “The Bible, Mission, and Social Location: Toward a Missional Hermeneutic,” *Interpretation* (Richmond) 61, no. 1 (2007): 42–58. Many Christians and mission leaders have considered “Great Commission” in Matthew 28: 18–20 as the only biblical foundation for mission. Other passages are Mark 16:15–16; Luke 24:44–49; John 20:19–23; and Acts 1:7–8.

8. Barram, “The Bible, Mission, and Social Location”: 42–58.

9. See Esau McCaulley, *Reading While Black: African American Biblical Interpretation as An Exercise in Hope* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2020).

10. Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 16.

11. Dana Lee Robert, *Christian Mission: How Christianity Became a World Religion*, *Blackwell Brief Histories of Religion Series* (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 11.

12. Michael W. Goheen, *Reading the Bible Missionally*, The Gospel and Our Culture Series (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2016), 15.

13. Christopher J. H. Wright, *The Mission of God: Unlocking the Bible’s Grand Narrative* (Downers Grove, Ill: IVP Academic, 2006), 67.

14. Christopher J. H. Wright, *The Mission of God: Unlocking the Bible’s Grand Narrative* (Downers Grove, Ill: IVP Academic, 2006), 67.

15. Wright, *The Mission of God*, 24.

16. Paul R. House, *Old Testament Theology* (Downers Grove, Ill: InterVarsity Press, 1998), 440.



directive for a successful life.”<sup>17</sup>

Another scholar, Holscher argues that the so-called older proverb literature is from the Persian period. The final version of the Book of the Proverbs may have been completed after the Exile. However, wisdom literature existed in the Fertile Crescent region even before the book of Hebrews emerged in history. This similarity confirms that “Solomon’s proverbs were part of an international, pan-oriental, wisdom literature” (cf. 1 Kgs. 4:29–34; 5:9–14).<sup>18</sup>

According to Giovanni Pettinato, the royal archives at Tell-Mardikh (Ebla) had some tablets that contained a collection of proverbs. It can be inferred that the tablets date back to a period between 2400 and 2250 BCE.<sup>19</sup> This ancient Near Eastern wisdom literature sheds light on the theology of Proverbs, covering topics such as authorship, literary forms, structure, arrangement, transmission, and exegesis. The holy number “30” symbolizes complete and perfect teaching (Prov. 22:20). Yahweh is depicted as the one who “weighs the heart” and stands at the judgment of the dead next to the scales with a human heart (Prov. 24:12).<sup>20</sup> This idea is based on the ancient Egyptian concept of judgment after death, where the deceased was weighed by the god Thoth.<sup>21</sup>

The Wisdom Literature, which includes Proverbs, Job, and Ecclesiastes, is a type of literature that was prevalent in ancient Near Eastern culture for over a millennium prior to the Israelites settling in Canaan. The Israelites were aware of this and even held the wisdom of other nations in high regard while praising the wisdom of their own. For instance, when the historian mentions that Solomon’s wisdom surpassed that of wise men from other lands, it is meant as a compliment, as those individuals were already recognized for their exceptional wisdom (1 Kgs. 4:30–31).<sup>22</sup>

17. James B. Pritchard, *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament*, 3d ed., with supplement. (Princeton, N. J.: Princeton University Press, 1969), 412; Carol L. Meyers, *Exodus*, New Cambridge Bible Commentary (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 26. John J. Pilch, “Proverbs in Middle East North Africa (MENA) Cultural Context,” *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 45, no. 4 (2015): 202–14. John J. Pilch compares the Book of Proverbs and Middle East North Africa (MENA) and finds a close similarity. He suggests four cultural scenarios for understanding the Book of Proverbs: (1) “normative inconsistency,” (2) “collectivistic personality,” (3) “three-zone personality,” and (4) “secrecy, deception, and lying.” Normative inconsistency makes a satisfying and fulfilling life possible despite contradictions. Collectivistic personalities make a sharp distinction between in-groups and out-groups. Every person is understood to be embedded in others and have his or her identity only in relation to these others who formed this fundamental group. There are three zone personality. Human beings consist of three mutually interpenetrating yet distinguishable zones of interaction with persons and things in the human environment symbolically interpreted: the zone of emotion-fused thought, the zone of self-expressive speech, and the zone of purposeful action. Honor is a core cultural value using secrecy, deception, and lying. Lying is justified for the maintenance of honor.

18. Bruce K. Waltke, *The Book of Proverbs. Chapters 1:1–15*, New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2004), 29.

19. Waltke, *The Book of Proverbs. Chapters 1:1–15*, 29.

20. Waltke, *The Book of Proverbs. Chapters 1:1–15*, 31.

21. Gerhard von Rad, *Old Testament Theology*. (New York: Harper, 1962), 437.

22. Waltke, *The Book of Proverbs. Chapters 1:1–15*, 31.

In the Old Testament, there are several nations known for their class of wise men, including Babylon, Edom, Tyre, Assyria, and Persia. However, the most prominent ones are Egypt and Babylon, which is evident in the wisdom texts that survived from those locations. Egypt’s wisdom texts include “Ptahhotep, Merikare, Amenemhet, Ani, Amenemope, and Onksheshonqy.” On the other hand, Babylon’s wisdom texts include the “Counsels of Wisdom, Man and his God, Ludlul, the Dialogue of Pessimism, the Babylonian Theodicy, and Ahikar.” These texts can be read in translation, and there are various detailed comparisons made between their teachings and Old Testament proverbial literature.<sup>23</sup>

According to Wright, it is evident from these comparisons that Israel had a significant amount of interaction with their counterparts in neighboring nations. The Wisdom literature stands out as the most internationally influenced. This is demonstrated in two ways. Firstly, it addresses many topics commonly found in other cultures’ wisdom texts.<sup>24</sup> Secondly, it also addresses differences with other cultures. There are three main uniquenesses of Israel’s Wisdom Literature: (1) integration, (2) absence of deities and idols, and (3) monotheistic ethic.<sup>25</sup> Therefore, Israel was willing to incorporate wisdom materials from other nations, while also carefully evaluating and modifying them based on their own beliefs before seamlessly integrating them into their sacred Scriptures.<sup>26</sup>

The significance of royal wisdom in the ANE is confirmed in 1 Kings 4:29–34 and 10:23–25, which may also connect to Solomon’s trade and cultural relations with Egypt. Additionally, chapter headings in Proverbs 30:1 and 31:1 suggest the existence of other sources of proverbial collections that are not well-known. These facts indicate that wisdom has its roots in common experience and was widely embraced.<sup>27</sup>

23. Wright, *The Mission of God*, 442–443.

24. These include fundamental social and relational skills within society and particularly in positions of power, as well as concerns about moral order and social stability, personal, familial, and political success, happiness, and peace, reflections on divine justice in the world, the absurdities of life and how to handle them, and the challenge of enduring suffering, particularly when it seems undeserved. Wright, *The Mission of God*, 443.

25. Wright, *The Mission of God*, 443.

26. origins were not Israelite. Additionally, it is widely accepted that Proverbs 22:1–24:22 drew heavily from the Egyptian text, *Wisdom of Amenemope*. Tremper Longman III’s concise commentary on Proverbs provides a systematic comparison of the wisdom found in Proverbs 22:17–24:22 and other ancient Near Eastern wisdom texts, highlighting numerous similarities and common themes. Another example is a notable absence of belief in other deities and a rejection of magical, divinatory, and occult practices of neighboring cultures. Israel’s sages did not promote actions that were forbidden by Israel’s laws. Also, The Wisdom literature warns against idolatry through metaphorical personifications of Lady Wisdom and Lady Folly in Proverbs 1–9. Lady Wisdom represents God, the source of true wisdom, while Lady Folly represents other gods who lead to death. A polytheistic worldview can lead to cynicism regarding morality and fatalism concerning life, but these attitudes are not prevalent in Israel’s teachings. Wright, *The Mission of God*, 443–444; Longman, *How to Read Proverbs*, 77.

27. James D. G. Dunn and J. W. Rogerson, *Eerdmans Commentary on the Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans, 2003), 438.

## PROVERBS AND GENERAL REVELATION

Proverbs is closely related to general revelation. General revelation refers to general truths that

can be known about God through nature (Psalm 19:1–4; Romans 1:20). Special revelation refers to more specific truths that can be known about God through the supernatural.<sup>28</sup>

What is the relationship between general revelation and the Proverbs? What is important here is that wisdom came to humans first. The consequences of those who accept it and those who do not are recorded in Proverbs 1:20–23. The teachings of Proverbs are rooted in general revelation rather than special revelation, with a theological basis that suggests God is intricately involved in people's everyday lives. By reflecting on the workings of life, we can gain valuable insights into the truth about life. This principle also extends to teachings expressed through cultural traditions and experiences.

At the same time, Proverbs teaches lessons in the context of Yahweh, the God of Israel. Life before Yahweh requires taking account of insights from experience and tradition, expressed both inside and outside of Israel. These insights must be placed in the context of Yahweh. That principle applies to some ancient Egyptian works, such as Ptahhotep, Ani, and Amenemope, which contain discourses and sayings known as "Instructions."<sup>29</sup>

Catholic theologian Avery Dulles outlined five models of revelation: (1) "Revelation as doctrine." This view emphasizes the "propositional content of revelation" and sees faith as "a reasonable act of trust." (2) "Revelation as history." It is a story and narrative in Scripture. (3) "Revelation as inner experience." This considers revelation as an interior experience of grace or communication with God. (4) "Revelation as dialectical presence." God is not an object to be known by inference from nature or history, by direct perception or by propositional teaching. (5) "Revelation as new awareness." Revelation is an expansion of consciousness or shift in perspective that engages people to join in works of social liberation.<sup>30</sup>

John Calvin claims that "Without knowledge of self, there is no knowledge of God"<sup>31</sup> and "without knowledge of God there is no knowledge of self."<sup>32</sup> Calvin's argument explores the mutual relationship between God and human beings. However, this does

not mean that human reason is the starting point of all thinking, as rationalism believes, nor does it mean that human experience itself is the epistemological basis, as empiricism asserts. This is because autonomous reason and experience are based on the premise that any knowledge is possible without God. The general revelation is not effective for salvation, but it is useful for knowing God. The knowledge that Calvin refers to is not an intellectual capacity or a theory. Rather, it is a living encounter with God.<sup>33</sup>

Karl Rahner holds that God's grace is present throughout creation. Further, human beings are endowed with what he calls the "supernatural existential." The supernatural existential is the component of the human being that makes it possible for the human being to be a recipient of God's grace. It is that which makes human beings able to respond to God's offer of grace. Because of this, Rahner argues that all human beings have a prethematic (subconscious) awareness of and orientation to God, if not an explicit awareness of and orientation toward God. Even the person who denies the existence of God has this orientation, at a minimum, on the subconscious level. All human beings have an innate awareness and inclination toward God, even if they are not consciously aware of it.<sup>34</sup>

What aspects of the Bible's teachings about humanity are relevant to our exploration of biblical mission? According to Christopher J. Wright, the Bible's affirmation that human beings are created in the image of God (Gen. 1–3) implies at least four significant truths about humanity that are essential to biblical mission.

First, regardless of culture or religious worldview, human beings, made in God's image, can hear God's voice and benefit from the gospel's life-giving potential for sinners and rebels. Second, all humans are accountable to God. This is the basis of universal biblical ethics. People must answer to God and have an ethical responsibility towards each other, regardless of culture or religion. Though nations may not know Yahweh's law, they understand ethical responsibility (Ps. 33:13–15). Third, all humans have dignity and equality, regardless of gender, ethnicity, religion, or status. We are created in God's image, which sets us apart from animals and unites us. Christian mission should treat everyone with respect and love, as it's an essential implication of our shared humanity. Lastly, the biblical gospel is universal and relevant to everyone. Christian mission aims to help people become more fully human through the transformative power of the gospel. It restores the common glory of what it means to be truly human—a man or woman

28. Belgic Confession, Article 2: The Means by Which We Know God, Accessed in May 25, 2024, <https://www.crzna.org/welcome/beliefs/confessions/belgic-confession#toc-article-2-the-means-by-which-we-know-god>.

29. John Goldingay, *Proverbs*, Commentaries for Christian Formation (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2023), 6.

30. Gerald R. McDermott, *Can Evangelicals Learn from World Religions?: Jesus, Revelation & Religious Traditions* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000), 61–63.

31. McNeill, *Calvin: Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 35. In the following, Calvin, Institutes, Chapters and Sections, and numbers are indicated. For example, Calvin, Institutes, 1.1.1.

32. Calvin, *Institutes*, 1.1.2.

33. Sung-Won Jung, "John Calvin's Understanding of the General Revelation and Its Apologetical Significance," *Korea Reformed Journal (KRJ)* 12, (2009):335–370.

34. Mary M. Veeneman, *Introducing Theological Method: A Survey of Contemporary Theologians and Approaches* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2017), 51.

created in the image of God.<sup>35</sup>

When we read Proverbs, we feel comfortable with proverbs because they are a universal phenomenon in various cultures and societies, especially traditional societies. Mercy Amba Oduyoye, an African woman scholar, highlights the existence of numerous African proverbs that can assist in crafting a theology of creation that integrates both the African cosmology, which acknowledges God's presence in all aspects of creation, and the biblical theology of creation, which recognizes Jesus Christ as the Wisdom and Word of creation.<sup>36</sup>

Like Africans, Koreans are experiencing proverbs similarly. When I first encountered the Book of Proverbs, it felt like I was listening to a traditional Korean proverb, and I barely noticed any foreign parts. I would like to introduce Korean traditions and proverbs that are similar to the Book of Proverbs. Both ancient Israel and Korea are surrounded by unique geopolitical environments, powerful countries like Egypt, Babylon, and Roman Empire for Israel, and China, Russia, and Japan for Korea. They have struggled to survive through centuries of suffering throughout their history. Hebrew Proverbs are expressions of wisdom based on the fear of God. It deals with the daily lives of ancient Israelites in Canaan, the fierce battlefield of hegemonic powers. Korea also survived as a weak country, sometimes as a colony and sometimes as an independent country, among powerful countries around it. We have lived under the influence of China above and Japan below, exchanging political, cultural, and economic benefits. A proverb is a short saying/proverb that condenses folk wisdom and values handed down from ancient times. It is the crystallization of wisdom that contains the Korean people's long life experiences and the lessons of self-discipline and conduct. Similar to proverbs, there are aphorisms or maxims, which are short sayings that fit the logic and can teach a lesson.<sup>37</sup>

### Comparison of the Book of Proverbs and Korean Proverbs

I will compare the Book of Proverbs and Korean proverbs. I will deal with practical issues such as disciplining children, modeling, words, and so on.

#### Discipline Children

*"Train children in the right way, and when old, they will not stray (Prov. 22:6)."*

*"A needle thief becomes a cow thief" (Korean proverb).*

These proverbs mean that if the first small fault or bad habit is repeated, it will result in a later big fault or

mistake; There is a saying, "Habits from three years of age to eighty," meaning that once a habit is ingrained, it is not easily changed and persists until old age. This means that we train the child to follow the path of obedience and godliness, taking into account his or her nature, and talents. Departure or time. Habits and habits at the time of writing have an influence until the end (Cf. Prov. 13:24; 29:15).<sup>38</sup>

*"Folly is bound up in the heart of a child, but the rod of discipline drives it far from him" (Prov. 22:15).*

*"Give your precious child one more beating" (Korean proverb).*

Both proverbs mean that you should discipline your children so that they grow up properly. This proverb is intended to encourage one to be more diligent even though one is working diligently. "Do not fail to discipline a child; you may whip him with a whip, but he will not die; if you whip him, you will save his soul from Sheol" (Prov. 23:13-14). Today, spanking is considered taboo, but children still need to be disciplined. This also means disciplining children from a young age. It is a wise prescription for children's education to correct children's instinctive tendencies towards evil or their self-perpetrating personalities. This means that rather than giving your children what they want right away, you can teach them value in waiting.<sup>39</sup>

#### Modeling

*"If a ruler listens to falsehood, all his officials will be wicked" (Prov. 29:12).*

*"When the water above is clear, the water below is clear" (Korean proverb).*

Leaders and superiors must behave properly and honestly so that subordinates do not make mistakes. The logic is that if flattery and deception are used in the relationship between the ruler and the ruled, evil deeds will continue to gain the favor of the ruling class, leading to corruption and the destruction of the community.<sup>40</sup>

#### You Reap What You Sow

*"The iniquities of the wicked ensnare them, and they are caught in the toils of their sin" (Prov. 5:22).*

*"If not, will there be smoke in the chimney?" (Korean proverb).*

If you sow evil, you will reap evil results and be bound by the causality of sin. The law of action is to reap what you sow. If there is a cause, there will be

35. Wright, *The Mission of God*, 421-424.

36. Mercy Amba Oduyoye, "The Church of the Future, Its Mission and Theology: A View from Africa," *Theology Today (Ephrata, Pa.)* 52, no. 4 (1996): 501.

37. Jong-Keun Lee, "Hebrew Proverbs and Korean Proverbs," *The Korean Journal of Old Testament Studies* 27, no. 1 (2021): 257.

38. Lee, "Hebrew Proverbs and Korean Proverbs," 259.

39. Lee, "Hebrew Proverbs and Korean Proverbs," 267

40. Lee, "Hebrew Proverbs and Korean Proverbs," 260.



a result. "Do not deceive yourself... For whatever a person sows, that will he also reap" (Gal. 6:7). In Korea, this means that there is no smoke when the fire is not lit in the kitchen furnace. This is an expression that emphasizes the fact that everything has a cause to have an effect all.<sup>41</sup>

### Words

*"Death and life are in the power of the tongue, and those who love it will eat its fruits" (Prov. 18:21).*

*"Even if your mouth is crooked, speak straight" (Korean proverb).*

A person's fate is determined by how he uses his tongue, and in the New Testament, Jesus said, "I tell you, on the day of judgment people will give account for every careless word they speak" (Matt. 12:36).

In any case, you must speak the right and correct words, which means that you must not distort your words. Instead, convey the facts as they are. There is a saying, "A bird hears what you say during the day, and a mouse hears what you say at night." This means that no matter how secretly you say something, it can easily leak out, so you should always be careful about what you say. There are similar passages in Proverbs: "The tongue of the wise gives knowledge well, but the mouth of fools pours out foolishness" (Prov. 15:2). "He opens his mouth to give wisdom, and his tongue speaks the law of kindness" (Prov. 31:26).<sup>42</sup>

*"The words of a whisperer are like delicious morsels; they go down into the inner parts of the body" (Prov. 18:8).*

*"A horse without feet travels a thousand miles" (Korean proverb).*

Both proverbs mean that you should always be careful about what you say because gossiping about others is easy to hear and is easily accepted. There is a saying that words do not have legs like horses, but like horses, they can travel as far as a thousand miles. The fallen nature of humans is prone to accepting and spreading negative rumors (cf. Prov. 20:27, 30; 26:22).<sup>43</sup>

*"A word fitly spoken is like apples of gold in a setting of silver" (Prov. 25:11).*

*"A word can pay off a thousand debts" (Korean proverb).*

A word used appropriately according to the time and place means that it goes well together like good-looking and fragrant fruit on a beautiful plate. A similar expression means that difficult or impossible problems can be solved just by saying the right words for the situation. Even if you have a lot of debt, it can

be forgiven depending on what you say, which means that one word is very important.<sup>44</sup>

*"When words are many, transgression is not lacking, but the prudent are restrained in speech. The tongue of the righteous is choice silver; the mind of the wicked is of little worth." (Prov. 10:19–20).*

*"If the word you say is good, then the word coming back at you is good"; "Why should I spit on a smiling face" (Korean proverb).*

Talking a lot inevitably leads to conversations about indiscreet, untruthful, and vulgar topics, which ultimately lead to faults. Therefore, controlling one's mouth is wisdom. The tongue of the righteous speaks edifying words, like pure, refined silver without any impurities. The idea is to speak with a smiling face and with an attitude of truth and love. Making this posture a habit will bring good results, such as not spitting on a smiling face.<sup>45</sup> Both Israel and Korea value the skill of speaking and share many common expressions and proverbs.

### Foolishness

*"One's own folly leads to ruin, yet the heart rages against the Lord" (Prov. 19:3).*

*"If things go well, it's because I did well. If things go wrong, it's my ancestors' fault" (Korean proverb)*

Because people are foolish, they lack or have no understanding or sense, so they do not know their own ways, and they justify them according to their evil inclinations and blame God for their foolish actions. To escape from human foolishness, one must coolly reflect on oneself and be humble (cf. 2 Chr. 28:9; Isa. 30:30).

This refers to not blaming one's own mistakes or shortcomings when something goes wrong but only blaming others or the world. This is a warning against the attitude of saying that when things go well, it is because you did well, and when things don't go well, you blame others or blame it on fate. Similar proverbs include "The blind man reprimands the stream." The meaning is that the blind man who falls into the river does not think about his fault and blames only the river. A person who blames others for his fault. In a similar case, "I don't know that my face is dirty, so I just scold the mirror."<sup>46</sup>

### Man Proposes, God Disposes

*"The human mind plans the way, but the LORD directs the steps" (Prov. 16:9; cf. 19:21).*

*"Su In Sa Dae Cheon Myeong (Heaven helps those who help themselves)" (Korea proverb).*

41. Lee, "Hebrew Proverbs and Korean Proverbs," 260–261.

42. Lee, "Hebrew Proverbs and Korean Proverbs," 261.

43. Lee, "Hebrew Proverbs and Korean Proverbs," 264.

44. Lee, "Hebrew Proverbs and Korean Proverbs," 264–265.

45. Lee, "Hebrew Proverbs and Korean Proverbs," 265.

46. Lee, "Hebrew Proverbs and Korean Proverbs," 261–262.

These proverbs mean that people plan things, but it is heaven that makes them happen. A plan that is contrary to heaven's will only leads to futile results. No matter how much humans plan and proceed, if heaven does not help, a favorable environment or conditions for achievement are not created. "Su In Sa Dae Cheon Myeong" means that people do their best and wait for heaven's will. It is also a word of warning against regarding the positive results of something as natural human results. The Bible says, "Unless the Lord builds the house, those who build it labor in vain. Unless the Lord guards the city, the watchman keeps awake in vain" (Ps. 127:1).<sup>47</sup>

### *Commonalities, Differences, and Contributions*

The Book of Proverbs and Korean proverbs have similarities and differences in content. The common aspects are as follows. First, we see that both cultures enriched their lives through a particularly large number of proverbs and sayings. This appears to be based on the shared experience of hardship between both Israelite and Korean cultures. Second, Proverbs and Korean proverbs are all meaningful words that have been widely used for a long time. These are things that provide diversity in communication and expression in various situations in life and help promote smooth relationships. Third, both aim for expressions with meaning and wit, and the style is in the form of poetry. Fourth, some things must be inherited in spirit but reinterpreted in application. For example, Proverbs says to spank children for education (Prov. 20:30), but now spanking children is considered taboo in Korea. Derogatory expressions against women, such as the proverb that says that when a hen crows, the family will be ruined, run counter to the trend of gender equality, and we need to reflect on their literal meaning.<sup>48</sup>

Also, there are differences between the two types of proverbs. First, Hebrew Proverbs are characterized above all by being based on theism. While the tenor of Proverbs is based on the fear of God, Korean proverbs use the term "heaven" to refer to God, but there is no mention of God as clearly expressed as in Hebrew Proverbs. Second, Hebrew Proverbs and Korean proverbs are in the form of poetry, but Korean proverbs have a more metrical aspect. Most Korean proverbs have a rhyme structure that is pleasant to listen to and easy to remember.<sup>49</sup>

Proverbs is the daily life of the Hebrews in Canaan and the wisdom literature of the Ancient Near East. It especially reflects Egyptian literature. It summarizes the principles of daily application of Hebrew religious teachings. It is based on theism and is an expression of wisdom and fear of Jehovah. On the other hand, Korean proverbs, which have suffered from threats and conflicts from world hegemonies throughout

history, are the crystallization of wisdom and rules of conduct that contain long life experiences. They mainly consist of short sayings that condense folk wisdom and values and a rhyme structure that is easy to listen to and remember. They must involve customs handed down from ancient times; they are popular and popular among the public, and instructive in presenting life's teachings and policies. This means that it must be concise in form and have an implicit meaning appropriate to the situation in content. Hebrew Proverbs and Korean proverbs have similarities and differences. The divine origin of Proverbs and its use appears to have contributed to opening insight into the possibilities of challenging the limitations of life. Especially in times of crisis, further systematizing, establishing, and utilizing Hebrew Proverbs and Korean proverbs is expected to enhance the biblical-theological value of Korean society in suffering.<sup>50</sup>

### **ETHICAL LIFE**

Third, I argue that Proverbs emphasizes an ethical life. Overland explains that verse 3 starts with "equity," צְדָקָה (*tsedeq*) which means moral and fair exchange. Morality is the subject to be taught. To cultivate ethical character, one must already possess wisdom enough to withstand the inevitable pain of reproof (1:3a).<sup>51</sup> He translates *tsedeq* as "equity" while others use "righteousness." מִשְׁפָּט (mishpat) can be translated as "justice" and מִשְׁשָׁר (meyshar) as "equity."

The Old Testament frequently uses the phrase "keeping the way of the LORD" or "walking in the way of the LORD" as a metaphor to describe Israel's ethical code. This metaphor implies following the path of God rather than the ways of other gods, nations, sinners, or one's own way. This implies that Israel was on a journey guided by God's example and required to mirror his moral requirements to become a visible exemplar to other nations of the nature and character of their God (Deut. 4:5-8).<sup>52</sup> Those who are chosen are bound to have responsibilities. Otherwise, we have no choice but to fall into ethnocentrism. This responsibility is an ethical life. How to live as God's people in relationship with neighbors and foreign countries is a missionary life.

Bosch explains, "Mission is God's turning to the world in respect of creation, care, redemption and consummation."<sup>53</sup> The scope of the mission reaches beyond evangelistic outreach to affect all people in all aspects of their existence. He continually insists that the concept of mission is prevalent throughout the entire Bible. Rather than simply selecting specific verses to support his argument, he identifies four

47. Lee, "Hebrew Proverbs and Korean Proverbs," 265-266.

48. Lee, "Hebrew Proverbs and Korean Proverbs," 267-268.

49. Lee, "Hebrew Proverbs and Korean Proverbs," 268-269.

50. Lee, "Hebrew Proverbs and Korean Proverbs," 269-270.

51. Paul Overland, *Proverbs*, Apollos Old Testament Commentary 15 (London, England: Apollos, 2022), 37-40.

52. Wright, *The Mission of God*, 363.

53. Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 391.



hermeneutical principles in both the Old and New Testaments: compassion, history, suffering, and conduct. In the same way, Donald Senior argues that the Bible does not provide a specific formula for proclaiming the Word of God but suggests the “biblical patterns of evangelization.”<sup>54</sup>

### Compassion

The first principle is compassion, where God is portrayed as the defender of the weak, afflicted, and oppressed.<sup>55</sup> The purpose of the election of Israel was to service for other nations. Israel, however, did not fulfill the duty of election through the Old Testament. Despite Israel’s failure to be a servant for other nations, God is compassionate without no boundaries.<sup>56</sup>

There are many compassion verses in Proverbs. 2:8 (Guards the paths of justice); 8:15–16 (kings and rulers do justice and right); 8:20 (Walk in the way of righteousness); 12:10 (taking care of animals); 14:21, 31 (Have pity on those in need); 17:5 (Concern of poverty, disaster); 19:17 (pity the poor); 21:13 (Listen to the cry of the poor); 22:2 (The Lord is the maker of the rich and the poor), 22:23 (The Lord pleads the poor and the afflicted); 23:10 (Do not encroach on the field of orphans); 28:3 (A ruler who oppresses the poor), 28:27 (Gives to the poor).

### HISTORY

The second principle is history, where the Old Testament highlights God’s interactions with Israel. The Old Testament reveals the enormous missionary significance of God’s dealing with Israel. God is the God of history who saved the Israelites from Egypt and made a covenant with them at Mount Sinai. History is the arena of God’s activity. This becomes apparent in the call of Abraham (Gen. 12:1–3).<sup>57</sup>

God’s election of Abraham promises blessing to the nations. God called Abraham and made a covenant (Gen. 18:18–19).<sup>58</sup> Kaiser claims that Abraham’s blessing in Genesis 12:3 is present throughout the Bible, from Genesis to the New Testament.<sup>59</sup> The interpretation of “blessing” has been in debate until recently. He argues that God’s promise to Abraham in Genesis 12:3 is for the sake of all nations. He utilized an interpretation that focused on Gentiles. He recognizes that the verb “to bless” has different interpretations and can be translated passively rather than reflexively, meaning that “all people on earth

will be blessed” by Abraham rather than they “will bless themselves.” Most scholars have interpreted reflexively that nations would say, “May we be blessed like Abraham.”<sup>60</sup>

The blessing of God given to Abraham was intended to reach people groups as well as nations. Paul describes these words as “the gospel in advance” (Gal. 3:8 NIV). Blessing for the nations is the bottom line of God’s promise to Wright, *The Mission of God*, 216. Abraham.<sup>61</sup> Genesis 12:1–3 is also universal. The outcome of God’s blessing of Abraham and commanding Abraham himself to be a blessing would be a blessing for “all the kindship groups of the earth.”<sup>62</sup>

Proverbs indirectly deals with God’s salvation history through Israel. 8:35 (life); 9:3–6 (Invitation), 13–18 (Folly’s invitation); 14:12 (A way to the death); 16:26 (A way to the death); 18:10 (The name of the Lord is a strong tower); 19:23 (The fear of the Lord is life); 20:7 (The righteous walk in integrity), 20:22 (The Lord helps); 24:12 (Repay according to the deeds); 28:13 (Confess transgressions), 28:18 (Integrity is safe), 28:26 (Wisdom is safe); 29:25 (Trusting in the Lord is secure); 30:5 (God is a shield).

### SUFFERING

The third principle is suffering, where God’s witness is realized through national disasters and Israel’s role as a “kingdom of priests” who serve through innocent suffering for the benefit of others. Israel was allocated a priestly function in the world, and such service can consist of suffering for the sake of others (Exod. 19:5–6). Being God’s witness to the world does not mean an aggressive campaign with much verbiage but silent suffering on behalf of others (Isa. 53). In the deepest humiliation of the history of Israel due to the captivity, kings and princes will draw nearer to Israel. “Kings will see and arise, Princes will also bow down, Because of the LORD who is faithful, the Holy One of Israel who has chosen You” (Isa. 49:7).<sup>63</sup>

The Book of Proverbs was written over several periods and was completed during the Babylonian captivity. During their captivity, the Israelites went through national hardships during the captivity, similar to their experiences in Egypt. The Book of Proverbs itself does not contain much information about suffering.

### CONDUCT

The fourth principle is conduct, where actions speak louder than words, and it is essential to be resent for others. Proclamation is not just spoken words but the manifestation of service. To witness is to

54. Donald Senior, *The Biblical Foundations for Mission* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1983), 332

55. David J Bosch, “Hermeneutical Principles in the Biblical Foundation for Mission,” *Evangelical Review of Theology* 17, no. 4 (1993): 443.

56. Walter C. Jr. Kaiser, *Mission in the Old Testament: Israel As a Light to the Nations* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2012), 69–70.

57. Bosch, “Hermeneutical Principles in the Biblical Foundation for Mission,” 445.

58. Wright, *The Mission of God*, 358.

59. Kaiser, *Mission in the Old Testament*, xi–xii

60. Kaiser, *Mission in the Old Testament*, 19.

61. Wright, *The Mission of God*, 194.

62. Wright, *The Mission of God*, 216.

63. Bosch, “Hermeneutical Principles in the Biblical Foundation for Mission,” 445

exist and experience the mission of being there for others (Isa. 42:18–20; 48:8–13). This is the centripetal dimension of mission in the Old Testament.<sup>64</sup> Israel's specific mission was more centripetal than centrifugal. People of the Old Testament played a passive role in witnessing the Word of God; rather, people from other nations did come to Zion to seek God (centripetal).<sup>65</sup>

God chose Abraham with the intention of creating a community that reflects God's character, particularly in terms of righteousness and justice. This community's existence is crucial for God's plan of blessing the nations to come to fruition. There is no biblical mission without biblical ethics, as the ethical quality of life for the people of God is inseparable from God's ethical demand for the community to be a blessing to the nations (Gen. 18:19).<sup>66</sup>

The Old Testament emphasizes the importance of righteousness and justice, which appear frequently in various forms throughout the text. First, the root of the word for righteousness is "sdq," צדק which means "fixed and fully what it should be." A possible definition is a norm by which other things are measured. When applied to human actions and relationships, it refers to conforming to what is expected and right. Second, the root "spt" שפט involves judicial activity and means to act as a lawgiver and arbitrator in disputes. The word "mispat" מִשְׁפָּט refers to a legal ordinance. The phrase "the *mispat* of the orphan and widow" refers to their rightful case against those who would exploit them.<sup>67</sup>

In Proverbs, there are many verses relating to conduct. 3:27 ("Do not hold good from those to whom it is due."); 11:1 (Accurate weight), 11:20 (Blameless ways), 11:24–25 (Generous person), 11:27 (Seeks good); 14:2 (Walk uprightly), 14:22 (Plan good); 16:2 (Pure in eyes), 16:7 (Peacemaker); 21:3 (Do righteousness and justice), 21:26 (The righteous give); 22:10 (The generous share), 22:22 (Do not rob the poor and crush the afflicted); 24:17 (Do not rejoice in enemies' fall), 24:29 (Forgive others); 25:21 (Give enemies food and water); 29:7 ("The righteous know the rights of the poor."); 31:9 ("Defend the rights of the poor and needy"). The Old Testament missionary foundation consists of four closely interrelated elements. The God who shows compassion to all is also the God of history, who uses Israel's specific history as a platform for his dealings with nations. He is with Israel in their times of suffering, and they witness God's work through their conduct. The Book of Proverbs does not cover the history of the Israelites, but it speaks specifically about how they should live.

## CREATION CARE

Western theology focuses on issues of reconciliation

64. Bosch, "Hermeneutical Principles in the Biblical Foundation for Mission," 446.

65. Kaiser, *Mission in the Old Testament*, xiii.

66. Wright, *The Mission of God*, 365–368.

67. Wright, *The Mission of God*, 366.

and salvation only between humans and God. According to Walter Zimmerli, "The Book of Wisdom argues that it must be viewed within the framework of a theology of creation."<sup>68</sup> Relating to creation and mission, Wright argues that if our mission is to be faithful to God's mission, it must embrace the entire planet and the entirety of human existence and needs. Just as the purpose of human life is to glorify God, creations must also glorify God the Creator and live in harmony. God's mission is for us to take good care of nature without destroying it because everything in the universe belongs to God (Deut. 10:14).<sup>69</sup>

George Monbiot wrote that "we inhabit the brief historical interlude between ecological constraint and ecological catastrophe."<sup>70</sup> Throughout most of human history, people were limited by the natural environment in which they lived. However, in the modern era, the Western world became dedicated to using science and technology to dominate nature and extend human power.<sup>71</sup> David G. Horrell argues that Genesis 1:26–28 calls for stewardship, not "aggressive technological dominance of the earth. The Bible is widely regarded as a significant source of positive ecological theology."<sup>72</sup>

Richard Bauckham stresses the importance of acknowledging the praise that creation offers in ecological spirituality. Other creatures can help humans worship God. Biblical texts (Isa. 42:10; Ps. 19:1–4; 69:34; 96:11–12; 98:7–8; 103:22; 148; 150:6; Phil. 2:10; Rev. 5:13) that speak of creation's praise are often misunderstood as "pre-scientific animism" or "panpsychism." However, these passages are metaphorical and point to the reality that all creatures glorify God by fulfilling their God-given roles in His creation.<sup>73</sup> Similarly, C. S. Lewis said that Christians need to balance between "identifying God too closely with the world and not keeping God close enough."<sup>74</sup>

Scott Hoezee calls this "the ecology of praise" which is "creation's choir that sings a song of high and holy praise To God's name."<sup>75</sup> Being around animals reminds us of Saint Francis of Assisi's connection with

68. Amy Plantinga Pauw, *Proverbs and Ecclesiastes: A Theological Commentary on the Bible*, First edition., Belief: A Theological Commentary on the Bible (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2015), 1–2. 7.

69. Wright, *The Mission of God*, 397–420.

70. George Monbiot, *Heat: How to Stop the Planet from Burning* (Cambridge, MA: South End Press, 2007), xxi.

71. Richard Bauckham, *Living with Other Creatures: Green Exegesis and Theology*, 1st ed. (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2011), 1.

72. David G. Horrell, *The Bible and the Environment: Towards a Critical Ecological Biblical Theology*, Biblical Challenges in the Contemporary World (New York: Routledge, 2014), 12. "An ecological biblical theology might centre around a confession that God has created all things good, has bound Godself eternally in covenant to all the earth, calls all creation to a vocation of praise, and is bringing about the reconciliation and redemption of all things in Christ." Horrell, *The Bible and the Environment*, 136.

73. Bauckham, *Living with Other Creatures*, 149.

74. Scott Hoezee, *Remember Creation: God's World of Wonder and Delight* (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans, 1998), 84. C. S. Lewis, *Letters to Malcolm: Chiefly on Prayer*, [1st American ed.], Harvest/HBJ Book (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1964), 74.

75. Hoezee, *Remember Creation*, 45.

nature. According to Francis Schaeffer, we don't need to believe in evolution to recognize our link with all living things. As Christians, we know that we are ultimately related to animals and trees because we were made by the same Creator God.<sup>76</sup> Biodiversity reflects the goodness of God beyond imagination. One creature alone cannot express God's image. Denis Edwards notes that only the diversity of life, including trees, ants, parrots, wildflowers, and humans, can give expression to "the radical diversity and otherness of the trinitarian God." He argues that humanity and the world are being made into the image of God, and faith is an ecological communion growing in love towards the fullness of life as seen in the Resurrection of Jesus.<sup>77</sup>

According to Edwards, Thomas Aquinas had explained long ago that God's way of acting in the world (known as primary causality) is not in opposition to the entire system of cause and effect in nature (known as second causality). In other words, God's work is accomplished through the natural cause and effect that occurs in the world.<sup>78</sup>

All life on Earth is one community, emerging from the same biological process. Humans need other species to survive; trees, for instance, absorb carbon dioxide and release oxygen. We are not rulers of nature, but fundamentally dependent on it. The biblical vision of the community of creation offers a similar perspective, with all beings sustained by the Creator of everything.<sup>79</sup> Today, we can interpret Proverbs as a guide to address pressing environmental issues. For example, Proverbs 12:10 emphasizes the importance of compassion towards animals, while condemning the cruelty of those who neglect or abuse them. Ultimately, Proverbs invites us to see creation as a reflection of God's wisdom and care, rather than a disposable or exploitable resource.<sup>80</sup>

Proverbs points out that there are many stories about animals, plants, and nature, and that humans have much to learn from them. Lazy people should go to the ants and learn ("go to the ant") in Proverbs 6:6. A tree of life connects life and trees (11:30; 13:12; 15:4, 12:10). Of course, it is personified, but trees continuously supply the oxygen that humans need. It is said that righteous people know the needs of animals, but wicked people treat animals cruelly. Protecting the natural environment is the mission given to humans by God.

OBJECT	BIBLE	EXPLAIN
Animals	12:10	"The righteous know the needs of their animals"

76. Hoezee, *Remember Creation*, 37.

77. Elizabeth A. Johnson, *Ask the Beasts: Darwin and the God of Love* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), 149; Denis Edwards, *Ecology at the Heart of Faith* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, c2006), 78.

78. Johnson, *Ask the Beasts*, 168; Edwards, *The God of Evolution: A Trinitarian Theology* (New York: Paulist Press, 1999), 47.

79. Johnson, *Ask the Beasts*, 266.

80. Pauw, *Proverbs and Ecclesiastes*, 2.

OBJECT	BIBLE	EXPLAIN
Ants	6:6 30:25	"Consider its ways" (6:6) "the ants are a people without strength, yet they"
Tree of Life	3:18 11:30 13:12 15:4	"She is a tree of life to those who lay hold of her" (3:18) "The fruit of the righteous is a tree of life" (11:30) "A desire fulfilled is a tree of life" (13:12) "A gentle tongue is a tree of life" (15:4)
Fountain of Life	13:14	"The teaching of the wise is a fountain of life"
Oxen	14:4	"Where there are no oxen, there is no grain"
Lion	22:13; 28:15; 30:30	"The lazy person says, 'There is a lion outside'" (22:13) "Like a roaring lion" (28:15) "The lion, which is mightiest among wild animals" (30:30)
Sparrow	26:2	"Like a sparrow in its flitting, like a swallow in its flying"
Horse and Donkey	26:3	"A whip for the horse, a bridle for the donkey"
Dog	26:17	"Like somebody who takes a passing dog by the ears is one who meddles in the quarrel of another"
Bird	27:8	"Where there are no oxen, there is no grain"
Fig Tree	27:18	"Anyone who tends a fig tree will eat its fruit"
Flocks and Herds	27:23	"Know well the condition of your flocks, and give attention to your herds"
Lambs and Goats	27:26	"The lambs will provide your clothing, and the goats"
Bear	28:15	"a charging bear is a wicked ruler over a poor people"
Leech	30:15	"The leech[c] has two daughters; 'Give, give,' they cry"
Ravens and Vultures	30:17	"The eye that mocks a father and scorns to obey a mother will be pecked out by the ravens of the valley and eaten by the vultures"
Snake	30:19	"the way of a snake on a rock"
Badgers	30:26	"the badgers are a people without power, yet they make their homes in the rocks"
Locusts	30:27	"the locusts have no king, yet all of them march in rank"
Lizard	30:28	"the lizard[e] can be grasped in the hand, yet it is found in kings' palaces"
Rooster and He-goat	30:31	"the strutting rooster, the he-goat, and a king striding before[g] his people"

Figure 1. Animals and plants that appear in Proverbs

## COMMUNITIES FOR PARTICIPATION IN GOD'S MISSION

Finally, I claim that Proverbs is related to a community. The Book of Proverbs contains numerous terms related to teaching, discipline, knowledge, skill, and instruction. Wisdom is not something that you are born with. It is something that needs to be learned, and the best way to learn it is through being part of a community.<sup>81</sup> Proverbs not only encourages us to be a community of faith but also equips the mission community to participate in God's ongoing mission. Community is an important agency for participation in God's ongoing redemptive mission.

81. Pauw, *Proverbs and Ecclesiastes*, 18.



Newbigin argues that many people in the West have grown accustomed to reading the biblical story starting with the question of individual salvation. This “soteriological selfcenteredness” is a Western perversion of the gospel.<sup>82</sup>

A missional reading of Proverbs is concerned not only with the fear of God, but also with how the Proverbs can continue to equip communities of believers to participate in God’s mission today. Goheen insists that “We must keep in mind the missional thread in the biblical story: the people of God are to be a distinctive community for the sake of the world.”<sup>83</sup> Richard B. Hays interpretation.<sup>84</sup> Nicholas Lash also argues that the interpretation of the Bible should be within the life and activities of the community.<sup>85</sup>

Jones also mentions the importance of community. Community is a central theme in Christian theology. It is important to understand that theology is inherently communitarian. There are two types of community. The first is liberal individualism, which places the individual at the center of social life and views social interaction as based on contracts between individuals. The second type is the retrieval of community, which highlights the importance of the social unit for various crucial aspects of human existence. The community provides personal identity, and people orient their aspirations, judgments, and tastes around their reference group. Therefore, she claims that theology should be communitarian, and the communitarian nature of theology leads to the concept of community as the integrative motif of Christian theology.<sup>86</sup>

In this regard, Christianity in Asian, African, and South American societies, which values community more than the individualistic Christianity in Western society, may be the ideal community pursued by the Bible. Wisdom encompasses ethical relationships between individuals and communities, including righteousness, justice, and equity.<sup>87</sup>

Citing Alister McGrath’s writings, Gerald R. McDermott defines the characteristics of evangelicalism as follows. One of the characteristics is the importance of Christian community for spiritual nourishment, fellowship, and growth. Evangelicals have often been individualistic, but tradition emphasizes the importance of the Christian community for spiritual growth. The Holy Spirit has continuously unfolded the truth of the Word in the church.<sup>88</sup>

82. Goheen, *Reading the Bible Missionally*, 280.

83. Goheen, *Reading the Bible Missionally*, 258.

84. Hays, *Echoes of Scripture in the Letters of Paul*, 191.

85. Nicholas Lash, *Theology on the Way to Emmaus* (London: SCM Press, 1986), 43.

86. Beth Felker Jones, *Practicing Christian Doctrine: An Introduction to Thinking and Living Theologically* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2014), 191–213.

87. Carol A. Newsom, Sharon H. Ringe, and Jacqueline E. Lapsley, *Women’s Bible Commentary*, 3rd ed., twentieth anniversary ed. (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2012), 234.

88. McDermott, *Can Evangelicals Learn from World Religions?*, 32.

The two aspects of missions, evangelism and social concern, still remain controversial among scholars, but holistic (wholistic) ministry that integrates them is becoming more important. Wright says that the cross of Christ must be at the center of missions. What binds

these two things, spreading the gospel and social participation, is the message of the cross.<sup>89</sup> Missions require spreading the gospel and social interest. There is ongoing debate as to which of the two is more important. It’s a topic of endless debate of which came first, similar to the egg or the chicken debate.

Jesus came to this earth for the salvation of humans. And he gave his disciples and the church the mission of spreading the gospel. In addition, Jesus healed the oppressed, the poor, and the sick in society. He did the holistic ministry of spirit and body. Social interest is essential in missions, especially for the gospel to be spread effectively.

In that respect, the Book of Proverbs has a deep social participation character. It talks about how the Israelites, chosen by God, can live ethically in community on this land. Proverbs speaks of practical patterns of behavior that maintained a faith that was unique to Israel, although it was influenced by the cultures of surrounding countries.

The Book of Proverbs is both universal and local. The Book of Proverbs also serves as a bridge in areas where the gospel is not well-received. The Proverbs is similar to the culture of North Africa, which is dominated by Islam. It also shares characteristics with the cultures of most Asian countries. While the Proverbs does not contain a direct gospel message, it can serve as an intermediary to find commonalities between cultures and lead them to the gospel.

## CONCLUSION

Historically, the relationship between missions and biblical theology has been tense. Fortunately, in the postmodern era, there has been a strong trend toward interpreting the Bible from a cultural perspective, with interpretation being determined by the context of the reader or interpreter rather than by what the original language of the Bible says. Missiological interpretation is also affected by this situation.

Reading the Scriptures through a missional lens leads us to adopt missional practices that emerge from the text. Continuously engaging in missional reading encourages us to embrace missional practices in our communal life as the people of God.<sup>90</sup> Wisdom permeates not only the religious sphere, from the family to churches, cathedrals, and mosques, but also the secular sphere, including business, such as markets, intersections, and cities.

The Book of Proverbs has been marginalized not only in the Old Testament but also in missionary

89. Craig Ott, Stephen J. Strauss, and Timothy C. Tennent. *Encountering Theology of Mission: Biblical Foundations, Historical Developments, and Contemporary Issues* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2010), 149–156.

90. Goheen, *Reading the Bible Missionally*, 277.

terms. The content of the Book of Proverbs does not contain theological elements that are very important to Jews, such as the law, sacrifices, and worship, but holds proverb-like stories from the world. It deals in detail with practical aspects that are very necessary when living in the world. These include the relationship between nation and individuals, the relationship between parents and children, relationships with other people, financial issues, issues with the opposite sex, and so on. It also emphasizes community. This is an ethical aspect of mission. In this world created by God, we need wisdom to learn how to live together with people and even nature.

I argue that the Book of Proverbs should be approached missionally with several themes. Firstly, humans were created in the image of God. Therefore, humans instinctively fear God and tend to get along well with their neighbors. And people naturally recognize God (or gods) in society and culture, and lives by nature by observing natural law. Calvin called this “general revelation.” The Book of Proverbs well represents general revelation in the Old Testament. Secondly, the Book of Proverbs interacted with and influenced the surrounding countries and cultures. It is a product of these intercultural exchanges. Additionally, it is a special law given to the Israelites. When the Israelites learn and practice the wisdom found in Proverbs, surrounding countries and peoples can recognize God.

Thirdly, Proverbs are ethical. This is the ethical part of missionary work. Ethics are a very important part of missions. In the Bible, the words indicative and imperative appear, and ethics is imperative. In spreading the gospel, both the Word of God and the act of obeying the Word of God are important. The Book of Proverbs implies that living an ethical life is part of missionary work. Missions provide love, interest, consideration, and practical help to our neighbors. This means that actions convey a message more powerfully than words. Fourthly, the Bible’s Wisdom literature draws its ethics and theology from a universal, creation-based moral order. This universality is important when addressing issues with people of different cultures and faiths. Furthermore, it stresses the importance of stewardship in our interactions with everything around us. This perspective is rooted in creation theology, which emphasizes that all living things were created by God. In the Book of Proverbs, we learn about

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# Familial Relationships (Mutualism) of Frontier Missiology of Asia's House Church Networks

David S. Lim

We have come to the end of the first quarter of the Third Millennium, which is almost 2,000 years since our Lord Jesus gave His Great Commission to “make disciples of all nations” (Mt. 28:19-20). With his full authority over heaven and earth (v.18), and with his promise to build His church without hindrance from the powers of hell (16:18), why has his church failed to finish the job? Why is more than one-third of the world's population still largely unreached?<sup>1</sup> May I humbly suggest that to be effective and strategic, Evangelical mission need to do His mission according to His simple plan for world evangelization and transformation in the power of the Holy Spirit.

This article highlights how the familial relationships (mutualism) of “Frontier Missiology” (FM)<sup>2</sup> has been propagated by the mission movements of the house church networks (HCNs) in Asia, as they sought to realize God's kingdom in contexts of religious pluralism. This has been implemented usually as underground communities and networks and on the fringes of Christendom (denominational Christianity) since the “gospel explosion” of the HCNs in China in the late 1970s.

The first conference of Asia's HCN leaders from seven countries (including China, India, Japan, Singapore and the Philippines) was convened in Manila in 2006. This was followed with annual conferences which grew to 23 Asian countries in 2009 when they convened the first global HCN leaders conference in New Delhi. Two more global conferences were held in Bangkok in 2015 and in Bali in 2018. Since then they have decided to simply convene local gatherings as needed, with no plans to gather globally again. They felt that they have already consolidated as a global family of families; what is needed is to just continue focusing on multiplying familial HCNs that will manifest God's kingdom on earth globally.<sup>3</sup>

We estimate that in Asia, the number of Jesus-followers<sup>4</sup> in HCNs have become more than church-goers in the denominations since 2018. Thus, we believe we can continue to multiply by just following God's simple plan to use familial relationships (mutualism), which means attaining full trust and love (agape) among a group (big or small) of people that are akin to “friends who are closer than one's brother” (Prov. 17:13; 18:24; 27:10) and “love one another as I loved you,” by which all can identify the true followers of Jesus (Jn. 13:34-35).<sup>5</sup> Can we apply this effectively in the rapidly growing global use of social media and artificial intelligence (AI) in our digital age? This essay describes this divine mutualism plan in its six dimensions: outcome, strategy, methodology, spirituality, structure, and ecosystem from FM perspective.

## SIMPLE OUTCOME: DISCIPLED OR TRANSFORMED NATIONS

The FM of Asia's HCNs adopts the holistic vision and mission of Transformation Missiology, which is based on Jesus' mission: to proclaim good news to the poor, realizing the year of God's favor (Jubilee) starting from his hometown Nazareth (Luke 4:18-21; 7:20-23).<sup>6</sup> His followers were taught to pray “Thy kingdom come” so that his will shall be done on earth as it is in heaven, and to do his mission which was to transform communities through sanctifying each city (polis) they reside in. World peace (shalom) can be attained through discipling all nations to implement mutualism.

God desires all people to be saved (2 Pet. 3:9; 1 Tim. 2:3-5) and live as disciplined communities where they enjoy abundant life on earth (Jn. 10:10) as they obey Him as their Creator through their faith in Jesus Christ. This can only be attained through “discipling nations,” where individuals, families, communities and institutions are called to repent and be converted to trust and follow Jesus as their Lord and Savior to realize his reign on earth. This means transforming people, communities and institutions into Christ-centeredness,<sup>7</sup> growing towards righteousness marked

1. In February 2024, Joshua Project reported that percentage-wise Christ-followers are growing faster than general population (1.7% vs .87%), but the absolute number of non-believers is increasing; there are more people alive today that do not know Christ than at any other time in history; and India has over half of the global population of frontier unreached people groups yet receives less than 3% of the world's full-time missionaries. In <https://joshuaproject.net/assets/media/handouts/status-of-world-evangelization.pdf>.

2. On Frontier Missiology, see David Lim, “Catalyzing ‘Insider Movements’ Among the Unreached,” *Journal of Asian Mission* 10.1-2 (March-September 2008), 125-145, and Kevin Higgins, “The Key to Insider Movements: The ‘Devoted’s’ of Acts,” *International Journal of Frontier Missiology* 21.4 (Winter 2004), 156-160.

3. On the HCNs in Asia, see David Lim, “The House Church Movements in Asia,” *Asian Missions Advance*, vol. 35 (January 2013), 3-7; “Asia's House Church Movements Today,” *Asian Missions Advance*, vol. 52 (July 2016), 7-12; and “Vision and Strategies of House Church Leaders in Asia,” *Asia Missions Advance*, vol. 71 (April 2021), 17-20.

4. HCNs prefer to use “Jesus-followers” rather than “Christians,” because the latter connotes “church-goers” and usually have negative connotations in most contexts today.

5. Cf. Kevin Caldwell, “Mutualism Experienced: The World's Religious Heritages, and Ancient Wells of Wisdom,” *Asian Society of Frontier Missions (ASFM) Bulletin*, No. 20 (October 2024),

6. On Transformation Missiology (or integral mission), see Vinay Samuel and C. Sugden, eds., *Mission as Transformation* (Oxford: Regnum, 1999), and Bryant Myers, *Walking with the Poor: Principles and Practices of Transformational Development* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1999).

7. Conversion “implies the use of existing structures, the

by self-giving love (agape), where every family will be blessed (cf. Gen 12:1-3).

God's kingdom on earth is best depicted in Isaiah 65:17-25 which envisions a "new heaven and new earth" (called the New Jerusalem in Rev 21-22) where death, marriage and child-bearing still prevail, yet blessedness is passed on for generations (v. 23). Humanity will reach their full potential of "being human" (created in the image of God) through four righteous relationships: political governance (with fellow humans, vv. 17-20 and 25b), economic justice (with the physical world, vv. 21-22 and 25a), cultural indigeneity (with ancestral wisdom, v. 23) and spiritual maturity (with God, v. 24). All these transformations are attainable (not perfectly but substantially), so that "kings" will lead their nations with their earthly achievements into the eternal city (Rev. 21:24-27).

### **SIMPLE STRATEGY: DISCIPLE MAKING THROUGH FAMILIAL RELATIONSHIPS**

In FM, missions happen "naturally" through all believers (so-called "lay-people") making disciples as they migrate, work or study among the unreached as "tentmakers." They just use their vocations to go among the unreached to be models and witnesses for Christ where they live and work. Like the Apostle Paul, these "bi-vocationals" would not only be supporting themselves, but also subsidizing their co-workers and even helping the poor (Acts 20:33-35).

To transform the world, Jesus just modeled and trained his disciples to evangelize the villages of Galilee (eventually to all nations) by simply sending them two by two without bringing outside resources into the community (Luke 10:4). They just had to find a local "person of peace" (vv. 5-6) and disciple that person to disciple their relatives, friends and neighbors (vv. 4b-9), transforming them from "wolves" into "lambs" (cf. v. 3) from house to house (not by the outsider, but by the insider, v. 7). If there is no such person in a community, they can just go to another one (vv. 10-16).

And that's how the apostles and the early church extended God's kingdom, through forming house (oikos) church networks (HCNs) in each place, across the Roman Empire and beyond. Each oikos or "household" was composed of the family, tenants and slaves, as seen in the instructions given in Eph. 5:22-6:9 & Col. 3:18-4:1.<sup>8</sup> Missions were done by all believers (Acts 8:1,4; 11:19-21). Simple believers who scattered

<sup>8</sup>turning of these structures to new directions, the application of new material and standards to a system of thought and conduct already in place and functioning. It is not about substitution, the replacement of something old with something new, but about transformation, the turning of the already existing to new account" in Andrew Walls, *The Missionary Movement in Christian History* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1996), 28. The process of transformation is from the heart or the "inside out," hence Christward.

8. David Lim, "God's Kingdom as Oikos Church Networks: A Biblical Theology," *International Journal of Frontier Mission* 34.1-4 (Jan-Dec 2017), 25-35. Each oikos church crossed many cultural barriers, particularly gender, age, class and ethnicity (Gal. 3:28, cf. Acts 2:17-18).

due to persecution in Jerusalem just extended the familial love in their homes to love their neighbors and disciple them for Christ.

The formation of disciples through house-based networks has been the practical outworking of the "priesthood of all believers," as all Jesus-followers were empowered to use their homes to bless their neighbors. It's simply discipling every believer to serve as God's minister in and through their extended family to their circles of influence. "Life is relationships. The rest are just details."<sup>9</sup>

**Friendship Evangelism.** "Making disciples" requires converting people to follow Jesus by pledging full loyalty to him as Lord of lords and King of kings, through both repentance from sin and faith ("worship") expressed in "loving God and loving neighbors" (Matt 22:37-39; 7:12), instead of doing religious rituals and ceremonies (Matt. 15:1-20; Col. 2:16-23, cf. Amos 5:21-24) in religious temples (Acts 7:48; 17:24).<sup>10</sup> The proof of faith is "love and good works" (Heb. 10:24; Eph. 2:8-10; Jas. 2:14-26). Jesus declared that he had come so that people could experience "Jubilee everyday" (Luke 4:20), and showed such good works as proof of his messianic identity to John the Baptist and his disciples (7:20-23) and the people (Acts 7:38).

Hence, we disciple and empower each believer to do "friendship evangelism" by simply sharing their faith through first loving with their neighbors, relatives, and friends – as they do ministry in their neighborhoods, workplaces and/or affinity groups (based on common interests, needs or causes). Then they disciple their new disciples in small groups called disciple-making groups,<sup>11</sup> like what Paul did with his disciples: teaching faithful people who will be able to disciple others also (2 Tim. 2:2). Behold, a new HCN is born!

**Simple Religiosity.** Isaiah 65:24 hints at a mature form of faith in the generous God whose blessings do not need to be earned or pleaded for, religiously or otherwise (cf. Matt. 6:5-8). New Jesus-followers with or without religious affiliation can mature spiritually to trust in God and love him above all. Their faith will start by adapting to the majority religion or ideology in their community (1 Cor 7:18-20), but ultimately develop into simple religiosity, each living a "love God and love everyone" lifestyle for God's glory.

Jesus taught his disciples to practice only three secret disciplines, in Matthew 6:1-18: (a) Almsgiving for friendship evangelism - sharing what they have with the poor; (b) Praying for personal devotion - hearing God through prayerful meditation ("Quiet Time"

<sup>9</sup>Gary Smalley, *The DNA of Relationships* (Carol Stream: Tyndale House Publishers, 2013), 37.

<sup>10</sup>On "conversions to Christ," see Rupen Das, "Becoming a Follower of Christ: Exploring Conversion through Historical and Missiological Lenses," *Perichoresis* 16.1 (2018), 21-40.

<sup>11</sup>On disciple-making groups, see David Lim, "Optimizing Discipleship Groups for Fulfilling the Great Commission," *Asian Missions Advance* 85 (Fall 2024): 6-11.

= *lectio divina*) to turn His Word (*logos*) into a word (*rhema*) to be obeyed; and (c) Fasting for prolonged devotion - spending prolonged time to commune with God and His word, while also enjoying its health benefits for long life.

Interestingly, these three habits of holiness are also taught and practiced in almost all religions, so they just need to be made Jesus-centered and Christward, without becoming ritualistic (vv. 7-8) and legalistic in doing them.<sup>12</sup> Maintaining these disciplines is enough to sustain the faith of Jesus-followers for their entire life. Yet as they practice these three habits, almsgiving will naturally expose them to their neighbors and involve them in doing community services naturally, which automatically becomes their social identity (and credibility). They simply become God's salt and light in the world (Matt. 5:13-16), without having to act religious or do anything religious (John 4:21-24; Luke 10:25-37; Matt. 25:31-46).

Asia's HCNs highlight "every-moment worship/spirituality" as the way of life in our communities, even if we know most people start their faith journey from their particular religious tradition. This grew from our belief that "following Jesus" is not a religion, but a way of life (Col. 3:17; 1 Cor. 10:31). Each Jesus-follower views their whole life as worship (Rom. 12:1-2; Col. 3:23-24). Each believer's house is an embassy of God's kingdom, thus it should be offered to God for His use to make disciples through incarnation and transformation, so that all buildings (including temples, monasteries and schools) in the world will be consecrated for God's use (cf. 1 Cor. 3:21-23).

### **SIMPLE METHODOLOGY: DISCIPLE MULTIPLICATION MOVEMENTS FOR COMMUNITY TRANSFORMATION**

God's plan for speedy world transformation is simply through relational "disciple multiplication movements (DMMs)" by converts in their local contexts. Jesus just trained his first twelve disciples to replicate what he did by pairs (Luke 9:1-6), which produced a second batch of 72 (10:1-17). They were sent out in pairs to do the same strategy (disciple 12 each) in the villages of Galilee, thereby producing more than 500 disciples (1 Cor. 15:6). At Pentecost, the 3,000 converts were baptized immediately, and discipled "from house to house" by these 500 Galileans, with each pair simply leading a group of 12 (Acts 2:41-47).<sup>13</sup>

Historically all "gospel explosions" and spiritual revivals were high-touch and hardly high-tech. Effective missions can be done simply through sending ordinary disciples to make disciples near the major unreached peoples to do this "natural" house church multiplication strategy. They just need

to disciple their person of peace just disciple a few (perhaps up to a dozen, like what our Lord Jesus did in his earthly ministry)<sup>14</sup> "faithful people who will be able to teach others also" (2 Tim.2:2).

To go cross-cultural, disciplemaker, just have to focus on making friends with a few contacts who are bi-lingual or bi-cultural; and these persons of peace will be able, usually almost immediately, to make new disciples among their compatriots through the "natural" webs of relationships (esp. relatives and friends) - almost always with greater effectivity, cultural sensitivity and "multiplier effect."

Thus, we just need to keep it simple and focus on "gossiping" the essentials (prayer and the Word) relationally face-to-face or online through the media (print, radio, TV and internet) for spiritual formation and transformation. Online ministry can work when friendship and trust have been established first. High touch "friendship" and "disciple making" can happen in Facebook or any social media. It's possible through personal and group chats, just like what we did during the lockdowns of the recent pandemic.

The main DMM model used by the HCN-Philippines and Filipino tentmakers mobilization movement is the formation of "Company 3," where Jesus-followers are trained to simply make two disciples who will each be empowered to make two disciples also, in a binary system akin to "network marketing." CMI-Philippines uses the "Effective Tentmaking Made Simple" webinar to train tentmakers to do "friendship evangelism" and "disciple multiplication" (in groups of 2-6) without extracting their disciples to leave their religious or atheist affiliation.<sup>15</sup> Anything more is a diversion from God's simple plan to disciple the world speedily. We need to simplify to multiply.

Actually we are only following the DMMs that resulted in the "gospel explosion" by the HCNs in China in the late 1970s to mid-1990s. They were building believers' "spiritual fellowships" in their homes, which led them to send out teenagers in pairs to evangelize whole villages through underground DMMs, as they advanced what eventually revived their "Back to Jerusalem Movement". They viewed their itinerant tentmakers as an army composed of "ants, caterpillars and termites," who can go anywhere, including temples, mosques, and even kings' palaces.<sup>16</sup>

### **SIMPLE SPIRITUALITY: INCARNATIONAL MINISTRY FOR CONTEXTUAL COMMUNITIES**

The most effective Asian HCNs follow the cultural sensitivity of the "Insider Movement" (IM)

12. Faith is a matter of the heart, not rituals (Rom. 2:29) nor festivals (Col. 2:16-17); cf. Mk. 7:1-23.

13. On DMM, see "Developing Transformational Leaders for Church Multiplication Movements in the Buddhist World." In Paul de Neui (ed.), *Developing Indigenous Leaders: Lessons in Mission from Buddhist Asia*. Pasadena: William Carey Library: 83-110.

14. Interestingly, Paul also started with only 12 disciples to reach the whole Asia Minor in two years (Acts 19:1-10).

15. Since 2001, my handout "Effective Tentmaking Made Simple" in *Blessing OFWs to Bless the Nations*, ed. Ana Gamez (Makati: Church Strengthening Ministries, 2012), 108-113.

16. Paul Hattaway et al, *Back to Jerusalem: Three Chinese House Church Leaders Share Their Vision to Complete the Great Commission* (Carlisle: Piquant, 2003), 90-91.



mission strategy of FM consistently.<sup>17</sup> IM has been promoted and implemented as forming contextual Jesus-following communities (JFCs) – usually as underground communities and networks and on the fringes of Christendom (denominational Christianity) since the “gospel explosion” of the HCNs in China in the late 1970s. The endorsement of IM in the Lausanne Movement’s Cape Town Commitment (2010) has been an encouragement for them.<sup>18</sup>

God intended his Kingdom to be composed of every human disciplined to have eternal personal relationship with himself as they walk humbly with him (cf. Mic. 6:8) through simple faith in Jesus – liberated from sin and the idolatrous and superstitious complexities of both primitive/animistic/folk religions and major/great organized religions, as well as from sin’s effects on the poor bound to their poverty and on the rich bound to their prosperity. No need to develop elaborate religiosity with elaborate theologies, liturgies, temples or clergies. His kingdom mission is to bring forth a spiritual (read: moral) transformation rather than just a religious reformation.

**Incarnational Ministry.** The rich harvest that Jesus expected from his disciples are being reaped contextually nowadays through the simple incarnational approach by HCNs. By just following the instructions of Jesus in his “zero-budget missions” (Lk.10:4a), every disciple just leads a “person of peace” (POP) to obey King Jesus effectively through love and good works vv. 5-17). As the POP’s family serve one another and their neighbors, the people (esp. community leaders) around them will soon notice and ask for their help. They then naturally rise to become leaders in the community.

The early church multiplied across the empire rapidly with big impact (Acts 17:6), because they used Jesus’ incarnational approach. Paul made himself a slave (*doulos*) to become “all things to all men” (1 Cor. 9:19-23 = the local hosts were his masters), and instructed his converts to remain in the vocational, sociocultural and economic status that they had at the time of their conversion (7:11-24). They can aspire to convert entire villages by winning the community leaders to Christ, who will then persuade their religious leaders to worship the Creator in Jesus’ name. These leaders will then transform their religious buildings into multi-purpose centers for good governance there, without constructing another new religious Jesus-following structure in the community.

The existing religion will be gradually (sometimes

immediately) transformed – rejecting unbiblical (sinful and demonic) beliefs and practices, while retaining biblical ones (1 Tim. 4:4-5; 1 Cor. 7:17-24). The POP begin their faith journey by contextually adapting to the religion (or non-religion) in their family and community. They simply develop their faith with a simple religiosity, with each one learning how to obey the Great Commandment to “love God and love everyone” (Mt. 22:37-39; Rom.12:1-2) in their society. Jesus did not try nor trained his disciples to establish any religious structure separate from the contexts wherever they lived and worked.

**Contextual Communities.** What will happen to the religio-cultural forms, esp. religious rituals and festivals of their families and communities? Jesus-followers should be allowed to develop contextualized religious practices, retaining most of them and redefining them as Christ-centered and Christ-ward customs (cf. 1 Cor.7:18-20), while finding “functional substitutes” for those beliefs and values that are idolatrous and occultic. When they are confronted and asked about their motivation, they can explain and witness to Christ, even if it may result in persecution. Preferably, they should have been trained to make contextual disciples before such conflict arises.

Their JFCs may even become more biblical and Christ-centered than the tradition-laden and liturgy-oriented denominations in today’s uncontextualized and Westernized Christendom. They will gradually learn how to get rid of anything that is sinful: idolatry, individualism, immorality and injustice. Not all at once, as all of us have not been totally rid of such sins ourselves, and as Elisha permitted Naaman to do ceremonial worship to pagan gods (2 Ki. 5:17-19). Almost all of our present Christian practices (in liturgies, weddings, Christmas, Easter, Halloween, etc) were adapted from pagan customs of pre-Christian European tribes anyway.<sup>19</sup>

Kingdomization is an occupation plan, not an evacuation plan (1 Cor. 15:24-25; Rev. 11:15), because Christ is ruler over all things (Col.1:16-17). Jesus-followers sanctify the non-believers (1 Cor. 7:14) and food offered to idols (10:20-26), because all things can be sanctified (Tit.1:15) by prayer and the Word (1 Tim.4:4-5). Jesus Christ entered European pagan cosmologies and transformed them Christward. New Jesus-followers can continue to join in the activities and festivities of their community with clear conscience.<sup>20</sup>

Hence contextuality should mark the JFCs, as they develop their communal spirituality according to the needs and gifts of the members. Following the 1

17. On IMs of Frontier Missiology, see Harley Talman and J. J. Travis, eds., *Understanding Insider Movements: Disciples of Jesus Within Diverse Religious Communities* (Pasadena: William Carey Library, 2015), cf. Charles Kraft, *Christianity in Cultures* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1979).

18. *The Cape Town Commitment*, Part II.C, Sec. 4, 47-48, entitled “Love respects diversity of discipleship” defines: “So called ‘insider movements’ are to be found within several religions. These are groups of people who are now following Jesus as their God and Saviour...while continuing to live socially and culturally within their birth communities, including some elements of its religious observance.”

19. Cf. Walls 1996, 15-54.

20. On IMs among Buddhists, see David Lim, “Appreciating Rituals and Festivals from within Buddhist Christward Movements,” *Sacred Moments: Reflections on Buddhist Rites and Christian Rituals*, ed. Paul de Neui (New Delhi: Christian World Imprints, 2019), 105-121; and Fukuda, Mitsuo, “A New Family Model for Japanese Families,” in *Family and Faith in Asia: The Missional Impact of Social Networks*, ed. Paul H. De Neui (Pasadena: William Carey Library, 2010), 217-227.

Cor.14:26(-40) pattern of meeting, all members come for mutual edification “to love and good works” (Heb.10:24) in their body-life together. In literate cultures, Christ-followers can go through any biblical text according to the interests of people present. In oral cultures, they can learn about Jesus and his teachings through story-telling, singing and drama. Today they can also download the Jesus movie and film clips from [www.jesusfilminternational.org](http://www.jesusfilminternational.org) and [www.indigitube.tv](http://www.indigitube.tv), with translations available in over 1,600 languages.

Thus, we just multiply POPs who can multiply contextual disciples effectively, so as to transform their communities and workplaces Christward – with indigenous JFCs that are truly replicable: self-governing, self-supporting, self-propagating and self-theologizing. Our first-fruits will be copied by future generations of HCNs, so we should avoid transplanting denominational churches (= complex Christendom) which are often decontextualized (= foreign-looking, if not actually foreign), hence have almost always produced marginalized believers who have been extracted from their communities – despised and rejected by their family and friends, not because of the Gospel but because of their extra-biblical forms.

We can take advantage of the deconstruction of institutionalism that’s going to overwhelm our future through automated and augmented information technology. In our postmodern world, we just need to be clear about two absolutes: God who loves all His creation and all humankind (Heb.11:6), and his revelation in Jesus who came to provide his redemption to restore fallen creation and humanity to his kingdom, so that his will (commandments) will be obeyed on earth. Our mission is simply to share these two absolutes in the most relational/friendly way possible – incarnationally, contextually, servantly – in every community by the power of the Holy Spirit.

Thus, as we continue to “incarnate Jesus” in existing sociocultural structures and avoid creating another system parallel or counter to that of the religious or ideological tradition in their contexts, our DMM can expedite societal transformation in JFCs. We can lobby for this contextual spirituality as we participate in the Parliament of the World’s Religions<sup>21</sup> and any regional or global organization for inter-faith and inter-cultural world peace, like the United Nations and its related agencies.

#### **SIMPLE STRUCTURE: FAMILY OF FAMILIES (NETWORK OF NETWORKS)**

How will the earthly New Jerusalem (cf. Acts 2:41-47) be organized globally as it is implanted as small JFCs and HCNs in society? Jesus did not form a formal structure, but introduced a cellular system that subsists in the constant reproduction of “new

wineskins” (Mk.2:22) embedded in the existing structures of society. Each JFC forms a part of any organization, where authority rests on the lowest units – facilitated by “leaders of tens (10 families)” – which are consulted and assisted (but not controlled) by the “higher” coordinating units, as they become leaders of their local community. In the early church, these local leaders were simply called “elders,” who serve as “first among equals.”

Following the doctrine of “the priesthood of all believers,” we can affirm the church-hood of every cell and the fellowship (*koinonia*) of all cells as JSCs (*ekklesia*) of God’s citizens who advocate for justice, peace and integrity of creation – in their neighborhoods, workplaces and online in social media – like in the zero-budget structure given by Jethro (religious leader of the nomadic Midianites) to Moses in Exodus 18:21-25. This structure is achieved from the bottom up as each Jesus-follower lives in *koinonia* with a few others in each of their circles of influence.

It is simply to multiply disciples in small groups and fellowships incarnationally in all societal structures – hence indigenous and fully decentralized with polycentric leadership. Jesus-followers will lead in the paradigm shift of all societal systems from “hierarchical and centralized” to “flat and decentralized.” The Roman Catholic Church has determined to become “church of the poor” and develop “a new way of being church” in the form of Basic Ecclesial Communities (BECs). For Protestants, this has been implemented by the Radical Reformers (Anabaptists) to form JFCs (called “societies of friends”), which may be called “cell groups,” like “house churches” in the early church. These JFCs thus become a global family of families, or a network of networks.

These JFCs are autonomous and localized – hence decentralized with a polycentric structure. They seek to transform and democratize all structures (religious or secular) from “hierarchical and centralized” to “flat and decentralized.” Each JFC can be empowered with the principle of “subsidiarity,” which gives authority for decision-making to the lowest unit. Each JFC can self-theologize, to develop their own understanding and practices on how to love God and serve their neighbors. Introducing theological formulations and religious practices from the outside is usually syncretistic for they can be easily misunderstood and often become superstitious. Their faith must grow out of their reflection on God’s Word inductively and contextually.

This bottom-up approach to sociopolitical engagement and transformation of communities is important for good governance to prevail so that flourishing societies can be built sustainably for generations. In today’s democracies, our JFCs are trying to install servant-leaders for inter-generational blessedness of families, communities and nations. These gifted leaders can form the “righteous elite,” like William Wilberforce’s Clapham Sect and Abraham

21. See [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Parliament\\_of\\_the\\_World%27s\\_Religions](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Parliament_of_the_World%27s_Religions).

Kuyper's Anti-Revolutionary Party. Winning electoral campaigns (or gaining access to political power) is a sacred calling.

Evangelizing and discipling incumbent leaders to transform their communities and nations are also being done nowadays. We can now raise servant-leaders to constitute the righteous elite faster. It is now easier to multiply influencers who can produce materials for YouTube and Tiktok, and with AI. Hope we are ready for decentralized and personalized governance, as the wind of the Spirit blows us forward to make Jesus Lord of all.

## **SIMPLE ECOSYSTEM: MUTUALISM THROUGH COOPERATIVISM**

And what will be the socioeconomic outcome of fulfilling Jesus' IM to realize "Jubilee everyday"? Asia's HCNs are also seeking to help their JFCs to introduce their mutualism (*koinonia*) into their world. "Loving one another" as members of one big family as Christ loves us (Jn. 13:34; 1 Jn. 3:16-18) was shown in the "common purse" of Jesus (Jn. 12:6; 13:29) and Paul (Acts 20:33-35), and in the early church's "caring and sharing economy" (Acts 2:42-47; 4:32-37; 6:1-7; cf. 2 Cor. 8-9), for socioeconomic development (cf. 1 Cor. 7:21-24), where no one is left behind.

Hence the JFCs will be known for their compassion and generosity. This is developed through their small group meetings, where they help one another to grow into mature spirituality marked by intimacy and mutuality that spur one another to grow unto Christlikeness (Col. 1:28-29) in the form of self-giving love (*agape*) that extends to their neighbors (including enemies), especially the poor (Lk. 10:25-37; Matt. 25:31-46).

Asia's HCNs are discipling their JFCs to express their communal sharing through managing a "common fund," like what the earliest church in Jerusalem with 3,000 converts practiced. Paul taught that sharing with one another for equality manifests Christ's love fully (2 Cor. 8:7-15). Those blessed with intelligence, health, talents & wealth should share their possessions with those with less (Lk. 3:10-14; 2 Cor. 8:9-15) – because everything we have are God's blessings meant for the common good and not for private use only. Freely we receive, freely we share. We are created in the image of the Triune God who are eternally sharing generously as equals.

Each JFC can do community development through social entrepreneurship ("communal almsgiving") in the form of cooperatives. They are the solution to poverty and inequality in our world today. JFCs can work to improve and transform democracies to be led by righteous leaders who will legislate and implement economic *koinonia* in their communities and nations. This legislation exists today in the form of social democracy or welfare state, which aims for each citizen to enjoy flourishing "from the cradle to the grave."

Gladly, last April 18th 2023, the United Nations' General Assembly resolved to build the Social and Solidarity Economy (SSE) to achieve their 17 Sustainable Development Goals by 2030. SSE consists of equipping and empowering the poor through social entrepreneurship and fair trade, so each person can have their own land (Lev. 25) and their own "vine and fig tree" (Mic.4:4), passed on to the next generations (Isa. 65:21-23).

The SSE would solve the global crisis of populism (both of the right and the left) that afflict even the established democracies today. The rich have become much richer while the poor remain poor if not become poorer. The God-given solution is to develop mutual love and cooperation from the bottom up, so that poverty is eradicated, as every family enjoys abundant life together in a peaceful and grace-full ecosystem.

SSE is built on cooperativism, which is coordinated globally by the International Cooperative Alliance founded since 1895, which presently consists of a billion members (that's 12.5% of the world's population) in three million co-ops which contribute to economic growth as well as quality employment worldwide. If we double every two years, we'll be 25% by 2026, 50% by 2028 and 100% by 2030.

Asia's HCNs are encouraging their JFCs to practice mutualism through cooperatives and similar community organizations and their partners. HCN-Philippines is promoting "Cooperatives as Mission" where IM is combined with cooperative development by mentoring HCNs and churches to form "savings groups," which will eventually become "faith-based cooperatives." As they save, invest and share profits together, they will become blessed and use their surplus to multiply JFCs. We are also encouraging JFCs to join a co-op nearby them, and learn how to become cooperativism experts on-the-go, and to join Rotary Clubs or similar civic organizations so they can challenge their partners to do the same in their community engagements.

## **CONCLUSION: MULTIPLYING CONTEXTUAL JFCS THROUGH DMMS**

We have shown that JFCs can be realized and multiplied contextually through promoting the simple spirituality in the different religious traditions. Every Jesus-follower can be identified clearly and can be disciplined to evangelize other nationalities cross-culturally. They can be disciplined to multiply disciples and build JFCs wherever they live and work. It is possible to plant and program the right DNA into new Jesus-followers, so that they can reproduce disciplemakers to form JFCs anywhere by the power of the Holy Spirit.

As our globalized world has become digital with laptops and smartphones, we can propagate FM even faster and wider to more networks of friends and partners worldwide online by just working from home. We are now accelerating into artificial and



augmented realities. Such online relationships are genuine for there is a human being behind every anonymous blogger or metaverse avatar. This makes the possibility of fulfilling Matthew 24:14 more diversified and also more likely in our generation.

With this effective FM way to multiply JFCs for world transformation, let us convince more mission leaders that familial relationship approach (mutualism) of HCNs is the way forward, as the “default mode” of the simple “original normal” that God designed to actualize his redemption plan for fallen humanity and creation to be reconciled to himself through faith in Jesus Christ. “Our Father, Your kingdom come, Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven” – not perfectly but substantially – in and through the exponential replication of contextual and cooperativized JFCs until all families on earth will be blessed (Gen. 12:1-3).

Composed of some Asian HCN leaders and mission agencies together with their friends in the International Society of Frontier Missiology (publishers of the International Journal of Frontier Missiology), the Asian Society of Frontier Missions has changed its name last year to Asian Society of Frontier Mutualism (ASFM), and just launched the inaugural issue of their journal Mutualism. May their advocacy for the holistic Insider Movements multiply organically to make Jesus preeminent mutually and cooperatively among the unreached. After all, usually new movements are started by movements.

Finally, we have also learned that this paradigm of effective missions seems to be so radically different for those used in traditional missions. So may I just plead for patience and understanding that we avoid debate over this issue, and allow both approaches to grow – at least for the next eight years, until AD2033, the 2,000th anniversary of Jesus’ resurrection. Let us bless each other’s efforts to maximize whatever we believe God has called us to do. May God find us effective in filling the earth with the knowledge of the glory of God as waters cover the sea.



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# God's Mission and Ethical AI: Opportunities and Challenges for the Future of Missions in Asia

Shankar Shikdar

## ABSTRACT

Asia, the world's largest and most populous continent, a home of roughly 60% of the global population. It's a legacy of fundamentalism, traditionalism, where people love to avoid changing situations. And with the presence of technology in Asia, like the Artificial Intelligence (AI), it gave birth to reforms in Asian societies, offering both innovative opportunities and pressing ethical challenges.<sup>1</sup> For the Church, AI presents innovative tools for evangelism, discipleship, pastoral care, and business as mission, yet also raises concerns of ethical issues like dehumanization, digital inequality, and theological distortion. This article explores the relationship between *Missio Dei*<sup>2</sup> and the ethical use of AI in Asian missions. By grounding reflection in biblical theology, assessing emerging opportunities, and identifying critical risks, the study proposes a framework for ethical AI<sup>3</sup> use that upholds human dignity, advances justice, and strengthens the Church's witness in the digital age.

## INTRODUCTION

From the prehistoric pigments<sup>4</sup> to this twenty-first century, a huge technological revolution ascended that rivals the printing press and the industrial age: the rise of artificial intelligence (AI). Asia stands at the forefront of this transformation, with AI shaping economies, education, communication, and governance. For Christians, the pressing question is not whether AI will impact mission, but how it will do so, and whether its use will align with the purposes of God. Technology is never neutral. It embodies human values and can either advance the kingdom of God or undermine it. As the Church in Asia reflects on its role in the rapidly evolving digital landscape, the biblical foundation of *Missio Dei* provides a critical lens.

## BIBLICAL AND THEOLOGICAL FOUNDATIONS OF GOD'S MISSION

The Bible is above all the innovations and situations. The Bible welcomes innovation, however, not

1. The ethical challenges of AI include bias and discrimination, risks to data privacy and security.

2. *Missio Dei* is a Latin theological term meaning "the mission of God" or "the sending of God," referring to the belief that God is the active source of all mission, and His redemptive power encompasses creation.

3. Ethical AI refers to the practice of designing, developing, and deploying artificial intelligence systems in a way that upholds human values minimizing potential harm and bias.

4. Prehistoric pigments were derived from natural minerals, primarily the iron-based pigments ochre (red, yellow, brown) and manganese oxide (black), along with charcoal.

dehumanization. Matthew 28:19–20 the Great Commission states, "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations... teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you." This verse commands global discipleship, which today can be aided powerfully through digital tools, allowing us to reach places physically inaccessible. 1 Corinthians 9:22–23 states, "I have become all things to all people so that by all possible means I might save some. I do all this for the sake of the gospel..." Paul's flexibility in mission suggests using "all possible means" — which today may include AI, apps, or online platforms — for gospel outreach. Proverbs 8:12 states, "I, wisdom, dwell with prudence, and I find knowledge and discretion." Wisdom and innovation can coexist. AI, when used wisely, reflects God's gift of human ingenuity and knowledge. Exodus 31:3–5 states, "And I have filled him with the Spirit of God, with wisdom, with understanding, with knowledge and with all kinds of skills..." This refers to Bezalel, empowered by God for craftsmanship — a principle that supports using human skill and innovation (like tech) in God's service. Romans 10:14–15 states, "How, then, can they call on the one they have not believed in?... And how can they hear without someone preaching to them?" Digital platforms and AI can amplify the "preaching" and reach of the gospel to unreached groups or those without access to physical churches.

The foundation of mission lies in the nature of God Himself. God is Creator and Sustainer: "The earth is the Lord's, and everything in it" (Ps. 24:1). Humanity, created in the image of God (Gen. 1:27), is entrusted with creativity, stewardship, and responsibility. This *imago Dei*<sup>5</sup> affirms the human capacity to innovate, but it also places boundaries: technology must never usurp God's place or diminish human dignity.

The New Testament frames mission through the *Missio Dei*, the mission of God revealed in Christ and extended through the Spirit-empowered church. Mission is holistic, involving proclamation, reconciliation, justice, and care for creation (Luke 4:18–19; Acts 1:8). Thus, the ethical evaluation of AI in missions must ask:

- Does it affirm human dignity as image-bearers of God?
- Does it advance justice and inclusion, especially for the marginalized?
- Does it contribute to God's purposes of reconciliation and transformation?

5. *Imago Dei* is a Latin term meaning "image of God," a core doctrine in Christian theology stating that humanity was created by God in His own image and likeness.

## OPPORTUNITIES FOR ETHICAL AI FOR MISSIONS IN ASIA

“No technology is ambivalent; each one comes with certain biases and tendencies. The true challenge of ethics is not in determining which technologies should be made possible but in determining how those new possibilities are wielded. Thus, Scripture puts the emphasis not on the technology, but on how those innovations are used” (Reinke, Tony, Dec 1, 2021). However, when guided by biblical ethics, AI offers significant opportunities for advancing God’s mission in Asia.

1. **Digital Evangelism and Translation.** AI has accelerated Bible translation, enabling minority languages to access Scripture more rapidly. For Asia’s thousands of unreached groups, this is a profound missional resource.
2. **Theological Education.** AI-powered learning platforms provide contextual theological training for pastors in rural or resource-poor areas. Digital tutors can supplement seminaries and extend training far beyond traditional classrooms.
3. **Pastoral Care and Counseling.** AI-based mental health platforms are emerging in Asia. Used ethically, these tools can support pastoral care where trauma, depression, and anxiety are prevalent, while reminding the church that ultimate healing rests in Christ.
4. **Diaspora and Urban Missions.** AI tools that analyze communication and migration patterns can help churches connect with dispersed communities across Asia, opening pathways for diaspora missions.
5. **Business as Mission.** AI applications in entrepreneurship, finance, and social innovation can empower Christian leaders to integrate faith and economics, especially in South Asia, where poverty reduction and spiritual transformation must go hand in hand.

## CHALLENGES AND RISKS OF AI IN MISSIONS

“Noreen Herzfeld said, ‘A Christian theology centered in our relationship — with God, neighbor, self — is necessarily an embodied theology.’ For that reason alone, it seems that AI cannot entirely replace human relationships” (Cootsona, Greg, Jan 23, 2024). Yet, AI poses equally serious challenges that require theological discernment.

### Ethical Concerns

AI poses serious ethical challenges, particularly in the areas of bias, misinformation, and surveillance. Algorithms often mirror the prejudices present in their training data, reinforcing social inequalities and marginalizing vulnerable groups. In authoritarian contexts, surveillance technologies powered by AI may severely limit freedom of religion, restricting worship,

monitoring churches, and silencing dissenting voices. For missions in Asia, these issues demand careful theological reflection and ethical discernment to ensure technology serves God’s mission without violating human dignity. “Even so, little separation between the soteriological and the humanitarian motifs was in evidence during the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. The missionaries persisted in the pre-Enlightenment tradition of the indissoluble unity of “evangelization” and “humanization” (cf van der Linde 1973), of “service to the soul” and “service to the body” (Nergaard 1988:34–40), of proclaiming the gospel and spreading a “beneficent civilization” (Rennstich 1982a, 1982b) (Bosch J. David, Orbis Books 1991).

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transformation.

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### Dependence vs. Discipleship

While artificial intelligence offers tools for spiritual learning, there is a genuine danger in reducing discipleship to digital algorithms. Prayer, fellowship, and discipleship are inherently relational and cannot be automated without losing their essence. True spiritual formation is grounded in the presence of God, the guidance of the Holy Spirit, and the accountability of the faith community. Over-reliance on AI risks creating a mechanized version of faith that lacks transformation. Machines can transmit information but cannot nurture intimacy with Christ. The Church must ensure technology supports, rather than replaces, the deeply personal journey of following Jesus.

### Cultural Complexities

Asia’s cultural and religious diversity adds unique layers to how technology, including AI, is perceived and used. *Societies shaped by Confucian*<sup>6</sup> traditions often value harmony and collective responsibility, while Hindu contexts emphasize *spiritual cosmologies*<sup>7</sup> that may see technology as part of destiny. In Buddhist regions, technology may be viewed through the lens of *impermanence and mindfulness*,<sup>8</sup> whereas Islamic

6. A Confucian tradition society is a society that is founded on the ethical and social philosophy of Confucianism, which emphasizes social harmony, virtue, and family relationships.

7. Spiritual cosmologies are comprehensive belief systems that provide explanations for the origin, nature, and eventual fate of the universe.

8. In the heart of Buddhist teachings lies the Noble Eightfold Path. Mindfulness, or sati, is a type of meditation in which one focuses on being intensely aware of what you’re sensing and feeling in the moment, without interpretation or judgment.



societies stress ethical limits under *divine law*.<sup>9</sup> These perspectives influence how communities accept or resist AI in spiritual and social life. Missionaries must therefore contextualize their approaches, ensuring that the use of technology respects local traditions and avoids cultural imposition.

### Economic Divide

The rapid advancement of AI highlights a growing economic divide within the global and Asian church. Urban congregations and wealthy institutions often have the resources to access advanced technologies, implement digital ministries, and train leaders in AI-based tools. By contrast, rural churches and marginalized communities struggle with limited infrastructure, poor internet connectivity, and lack of technical literacy. This unequal access risks excluding vast portions of the Body of Christ from participating in new forms of mission. If not addressed, AI could deepen disparities rather than promote unity. The church must therefore prioritize digital inclusion as a theological imperative.

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“As AI matures it would not be unreasonable to consider that whatever emerges will be the highest form of a false god that humanity has ever encountered. The Church is woefully unprepared, but the mission’s community has the ability to swiftly engage,

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### Theological Dangers

“Human beings are, by definition, mortal; by proposing to overcome every limit through technology, in an obsessive desire to control everything, we risk losing control over ourselves; in the quest for an absolute freedom, we risk falling into the spirit of a ‘technological dictatorship’” (Francis, Pope, May 25, 2024). Artificial intelligence carries the risk of becoming more than a tool—it can be idolized as a source of ultimate wisdom or control. When human innovation seeks *autonomy from God*,<sup>10</sup> it mirrors the *hubris of Babel*<sup>11</sup> (Gen. 11), where people attempted to build a self-sufficient system apart from *divine authority*.<sup>12</sup> Such dependence on technology can

9. In Islam, divine law is known as Sharia, a comprehensive legal and moral framework derived from the Quran and the Sunnah (the teachings and practices of Prophet Muhammad).

10. Autonomy from God generally refers to an individual attempting to be “a law unto themselves” by living independently of God’s authority, rather than being self-governing and free from God’s dominion.

11. The “hubris of Babel” refers to the extreme pride, overconfidence, and arrogance of the people in the biblical story of the Tower of Babel, who sought to make a name for themselves and reach the heavens to rival God’s authority.

12. In the Bible, divine authority is God’s inherent right and

subtly replace faith in God with reliance on human creations, distorting the mission of the church. The danger lies not in AI itself, but in its elevation to a godlike status. Theology reminds us that true wisdom comes only from God, not machines.

### TOWARD A FRAMEWORK FOR ETHICAL AI IN ASIAN MISSIONS

“As AI matures it would not be unreasonable to consider that whatever emerges will be the highest form of a false god that humanity has ever encountered. The Church is woefully unprepared, but the mission’s community has the ability to swiftly engage, if we have the will to do so (CDI Staff, March 16, 2024). The Asian church must adopt a framework that aligns AI with God’s mission. Four guiding principles are proposed:

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Artificial intelligence must be harnessed to reduce digital inequality and amplify marginalized voices. Churches have a moral responsibility to ensure equal access by investing in digital literacy, particularly for rural pastors and leaders.

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### Human-Centered Design

Artificial intelligence must remain a servant to humanity, not a replacement of God-given dignity. Every technological tool should uphold the worth of individuals created in God’s image. Ministry must therefore remain relational, prioritizing community, discipleship, and love, while ensuring AI enhances rather than diminishes human connection.

### Justice-Oriented Use

Artificial intelligence must be harnessed to reduce digital inequality and amplify marginalized voices. Churches have a moral responsibility to ensure equal access by investing in digital literacy, particularly for rural pastors and leaders. Such efforts reflect biblical justice, empowering communities while safeguarding inclusivity in God’s mission.

### Mission-Focused Application

Artificial intelligence should be intentionally directed toward advancing God’s mission—supporting evangelism, discipleship, and holistic transformation. Efficiency alone cannot define success. Technology must remain a tool to proclaim Christ, nurture spiritual growth, and strengthen communities, ensuring that ministry outcomes reflect eternal values

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ultimate power to govern, command, and establish laws over all creation.

rather than temporary productivity gains.

### Community Discernment

The church must approach AI through shared spiritual discernment, guided by the Holy Spirit. Decisions about its role in ministry should not rest on individual preference or technological trends but emerge from prayer, dialogue, and collective wisdom, ensuring AI strengthens faith communities while honoring God's mission.

Practical steps include: introducing AI ethics in seminary curricula, establishing cross-denominational task forces on technology and mission, and fostering collaboration between Asian churches and Christian technologists.

### CONCLUSION

Artificial intelligence is reshaping Asia in profound ways. For the church, AI represents both opportunity and danger. Properly harnessed, it can accelerate translation, extend theological education, and support pastoral care. Misused, it can deepen inequality, distort discipleship, and even become an idol. "What is the difference between a man who exists and a machine that functions? ... This is perhaps the greatest question of these times, because we are witnessing a challenge ... with a machine that is humanizing" (Friar Paolo Benanti, Vatican ethics advisor, Jan 18, 2024). The Church in Asia must neither idolize nor reject AI. Instead, it must adopt a stance of critical embrace, discerning how to use AI as a tool that serves God's mission. Rooted in Scripture and guided by the Spirit, the Asian church can model a faithful, ethical engagement with technology that both honors God and advances His kingdom.

### Practical Implications

- For Churches: Churches should organize digital ethics workshops for pastors and leaders, equipping them to engage responsibly with artificial intelligence. Such training fosters biblical discernment, safeguards against misuse, and ensures that technology supports discipleship, evangelism, and community life rather than undermining them.
- For Seminaries: Seminaries should integrate artificial intelligence and missiology into their curricula, preparing future leaders to engage critically with technology. This equips students with theological discernment, ethical awareness, and practical skills to apply AI responsibly in evangelism, discipleship, and mission strategy.
- For Mission Organizations: Mission agencies should apply AI tools for Bible translation, discipleship, and ministry communication, but always under strong human oversight. This ensures that technology enhances mission effectiveness without replacing spiritual

discernment, pastoral accountability, or the relational essence of Christian witness.

- For Global Partnerships: Churches and mission organizations must collaborate across denominations and national borders to develop and share ethical AI practices. Such partnerships encourage accountability, foster innovation, and ensure that technology strengthens the global witness of the Body of Christ in unity.

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# Missional Small Group: A House Church Model of Mosaikkirche Northwest

Mariel R. Eberhard

## ABSTRACT

This article analyzes Mosaikkirche Northwest's house church structure, emphasizing how important it is to strengthen the community's internal rhythms, where small groups nurture and disciple believers, and its outward rhythms, where members share the gospel and their lives. Rooted in the understanding how the early church in Acts could organically share the gospel through the community life. Living together allows members share daily life, live missionally, and offer neighbors a genuine way to experience our community. This strategy looks after members while also making a gospel difference locally.

## THE HOUSE CHURCH MOVEMENT IN EUROPE

The house church's concept is modeled after the church in Acts, where believers would gather in each other's homes to share bread and worship together. Throughout history, Christian communities in various countries have used the model of a house church to uphold their faith and commitment to God's kingdom in the face of challenges. The house church movement had also played a significant role in the history of Christianity in Europe.

Persecution from the state church compelled the Dissenters, a Protestant movement in the United Kingdom like the Huguenots in France, to go underground and they met as house churches, calling themselves "The Church in Wilderness."<sup>1</sup> Although they would still meet as a big group, most of their interactions were done in their small group setting. The house church structure helped them to continue exercising their faith amidst the persecution of the state church.

In Germany, Philipp Jakob Spener, known as the father of Pietism in the country, noticed a gap within the church. He believed that implementing a small group model could help strengthen it. Spener encouraged individuals to gather in small groups, which he referred to as *collegia pietatis* (pious gatherings), to discuss sermons or engage in Bible studies. However, the church viewed these gatherings negatively, fearing that these *gemeinschaften* (fellowships) were replacing the church's role.<sup>2</sup>

The house church movement in Europe gained

momentum because believers wanted more than just a typical church service. Wolfgang Simson noted that this growth stemmed from the belief that experiencing Jesus and the Holy Spirit was not limited to traditional church buildings but extended into everyday life.<sup>3</sup> There's no single definition of a house church; different communities have shaped the concept to fit their needs. However, this model emphasizes the intimacy and close relationships among believers, mirroring the communal life described in the book of Acts.

There is a growing desire for Christians in Europe to experience this intimacy with their fellow believers. And as neighborhood becomes more diverse because of the growing population of immigrants moving to big cities, believers are met with different challenges in sharing the gospel. The house church model could address these needs, offering a space for believers to gather, encourage each other, and cast vision for the gospel.

## MISSIONAL SMALL GROUP

In a society like Germany, which is both individualistic and post-Christian, it is common for believers to drift away from their churches after services, or even to question the need for church community altogether. This is why Timothy Keller, in *Center Church*, advocated for building missional small groups. These groups are communities where people share their lives and delve into the Bible on a more personal level. The goal is not just intellectual understanding; it's about learning to live out the Bible's teachings in our everyday lives and within the context of contemporary culture.<sup>4</sup>

My church, Mosaikkirche Northwest, is located in the Nordweststadt, a neighborhood of Frankfurt, Germany. For the past ten years, we have been dedicated to actively engaging with our community. This commitment to neighborhood involvement is a core value, reflected in our house church model with its emphasis on missional small groups. The church planting team prioritized that our house churches not only study the Bible but also connect with their neighbors. They envisioned a community mindful of the Great Commission and its role in God's work within our neighborhood.

Our church is focused in reaching out our neighborhood. Most of our members are living in it. This made it easy for us to gather in each one's

1. Wolfgang Simson, *The House Church Book: Rediscover the Dynamic, Organic, Relational, Viral Community Jesus Started* (California: Barna Books, 2009), chap. 2, subtext: More steps into spiritual darkness followed, pa. 9, [www.everand.com](http://www.everand.com).

2. Simson, *The House Church Book*, chap. 2, subtext: More steps into spiritual darkness followed, pa. 10.

3. Simson, *The House Church Book*, chap. 3, pa.1.

4. Timothy Keller, *Center Church* (Michigan: Zondervan, 2012), 262.



home during the week and be part of each one's lives beyond the regular church schedule. We wanted to emphasize alongside the house church structure the concept of missional living. Missional living is not just about building relationships and being friends with our neighbors, but it is also about proclaiming the Gospel in these relationships we have.<sup>5</sup> In the end, evangelism does not only become part of our lives, but it becomes our lifestyle. I want to emphasize here that what we are cultivating is a relational kind of evangelism and discipleship. This is the heartbeat of our community.

It is important for us to nurture a rich and intimate community for the people of our neighborhood. Living in proximity with each other helps us to be more engaged and intentional in reaching our neighbors. In a traditional church model, believers who do not have strong connection with it, can easily just disconnect. But since we are living in the same area and there is a high chance for us to meet when we buy our groceries or walk going to work, we are able to nourish the relationships we have with our church members. It is important for our church planter team to establish a community where an individual identify himself or herself to it.

Jesus had lived with His disciples and shared his life with them. The people in the Bible observed their lives, even criticizing them; yet they organically spread the gospel. Because of this proximity Jesus had with His disciples, He could model to them what it meant to follow God. Just as what is said in Michael Frost and Alan Hirsch's book *The Shaping of Things to Come*, our understanding of Christ should inform our mission, and in turns shape our understanding of the church.<sup>6</sup>

In Germany, young Christians seeking discipleship often attend a Discipleship Training School (DTS). These schools are typically away from their home churches; students then live in a dormitory and most of their interactions are done within the confinement of their school. According to one of our church leaders, she had joined this discipleship training. This experience led her to seek for a community like her DTS exposure. She shared that during her DTS, she felt a lack of missional living or the missional aspect of her discipleship training. Since she was living with fellow believers, they do not have a lot of interactions with non-believers, and she saw here how the house church structure and the concept of missional living had come together.

She was interested and decided to move here. It was interesting for her to be part of our church because not only is she surrounded with fellow believers, but she could receive encouragement and motivation from them to share the gospel to her neighbors. Since she is

also living in the same building as her house church, it is easy for them to meet their neighbors together and live out the teaching of the bible in those relationships. She said staying in a Christian bubble is easier, especially in a society like Germany where faith is not usually discussed, and finding a Christian friend who truly lives out the Bible is difficult.

It is important for us to create a place for our members to experience the discipleship they need to grow, not only as good Christians but believers who have missional mindset. We hope to strengthen both the inward and outward rhythms of our church. We hope that like in the bible, our relationships within our community would bring impact to our neighborhood.

## TO CARE AND TO INFLUENCE

One of our church planters had a conversation with Timothy Keller before he died. Keller said that we are living in a different time now. When he started his ministry, going to a church service is still viewed positively by the society. But we currently have a big gap between the Christian community and the people we are reaching out. We need to first invest in connecting this gap and create a space for relationship and trust to be built rather than emphasizing in the larger worship gathering.

Our church usually meets only as a big group for two Sundays in the month and the rest of the Sundays, we meet in our house churches. This kind of rhythm is common among churches who had adapted the house church model. Some even only meet once a month and the rest of the Sundays are dedicated to meeting in their house churches. This helps the churches to invest their time and money in more important things. This takes away the pressure for the church planters to buy or rent a building for the gatherings.

Our pastor said that when they were reflecting about what kind of church they wanted to build, they wanted it to be able to influence and care. They wanted a church that is big enough to make impact in our neighborhood and small enough that they could still care for each other. So, the house church model helped in fulfilling this direction. They wanted that our church would be able to give its members the care and discipleship they need.

Our discipleship happens within our house churches. Leaders in these small groups mentor and walk alongside the members, while our pastor mentors those leaders. Members understand their role in each other's spiritual growth, fostering a culture where the pastor isn't solely responsible for nurturing and evangelism; it's a shared effort. Our church leaders also participate in these house churches and are cared for by their own house church pastors.

The original concept of a house church in Germany is more inward focused. Traditionally, German churches would typically form small groups for their bible studies and prayer meetings. However, the church planting team wanted for these house churches

5. Tim Chester, "Missional Lifestyle", Acts29, February 8, 2018, <https://www.acts29.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/02/8.-Missional-Lifestyle.pdf>.

6. Michael Frost and Alan Hirsch, *The Shaping of Things to Come* (Michigan: Baker Books, 2013), chap. 1, subtext: The Rise of the Missional Church, pa. 4, [www.everand.com](http://www.everand.com).

to not only be a place for learning about God but a place where each one is challenged and motivated to reach out their neighbors.

Two years ago, we started a disciple-making team (Jüngermacher Team) alongside this structure. The team aims to meet every other week, while the other weeks are dedicated to meeting new people or evangelism. This came out from the idea that as our church developed and grew in the past years, we became more focused on the structure than giving space for people to meet other people and share the gospel. Although these house churches are open to invite people to their gatherings on Sundays or during the week, the weekly meetings became too much for some people and had hindered them from meeting new people.

A common challenge I observe in many churches is how adaptable they are to change. When developing new initiatives or program, it is crucial to keep the church's vision and mission in mind. As a church grows older, it is vital to strengthen both the inward and outward aspect of our community. We must care for our existing members while also reaching out to those who have not yet found faith.

## OUR HOUSE CHURCH

Our church is in a diverse neighborhood. Recent statistics done in our neighborhood shows that 73.2% of the population is comprised of immigrants or people with immigrant backgrounds, and we want our church to reflect this. Since house churches are usually formed based on where people live, it makes it easier for members to meet and connect in their daily lives. We are a German-speaking church because we believe it is the most welcoming approach. Many people in our neighborhood speak their native language first and German second, so we do not expect everyone to have learned English. I believe this differentiate our church from churches that classified themselves as international church and employing English as medium of communication.

My house church is composed of a Uganda-German family, Mexican, Hong Kongese, Filipino German family and another German. When we meet, we do not exclude the kids but allow them to also participate in our meetings. We believe that this would also help the kids to have relationships within the church and acknowledge their role in the community.

When we meet on Sundays, we usually start with a brunch. Everyone would bring food and sometimes we bring something that represents our home country. We would share about our week and just catch up with each other. I think that this is also an important part of our house church meeting because it helps us to know each one's story. Coming from a culture where stories play a vital role in building relationship, I appreciate the trust of each member to share their current situations.

After that, we would usually move in the living

room where we would have praise and worship and then read the Bible together. We read the Bible in English and German translation as some of us, like me, are still learning much of the language. Our house church's pastor is not always the one leading the bible study or hosting the house church meeting. Anyone who wants to can lead and host. Our house church pastor will normally assist the one leading if help is needed.

Following this, we would discuss what we were thankful for that week and ask for any prayer requests. We would pray for the person to our left, closing with the Lord's Prayer. Each member says the Lord's Prayer in their own language. This prayer resonates deeply with me because hearing it in various languages highlights God's ability to unite us, regardless of our backgrounds, in a moment of shared encouragement and motivation. We see a glimpse of the biblical prophecy where people of different tongue will worship God.

During the Sunday service, where all of us are gathered in one place, in the middle of the praise and worship, our worship leader would invite us to pray loudly in each one's language. I believe this also reflect how diverse God's people are and how despite of differences in culture, we are united in Christ's Kingdom. I love this part of our church service, and I always look forward to it.

There are times also during the Sundays, when we gather as a house church, we would invite our neighbors to our meeting. We usually would eat with them and instead of reading the Bible together, we replace it with games with them or just normal conversation about their lives. We want to use that time to build relationships and help them to get to know more about our community.

Aside from Sunday's brunch, our house church plans activities like BBQ grilling, picnics, game nights and instrument lesson during the week with our neighbors. We were able to build trust and deeper relationships with them. We also invite them to join in our special events. I remember when my husband and I got married two years ago, our former house church invited an Indian family to help them learn how to dance a traditional dance because they knew that I was in India for a year. Some of our church members also joined this dance. Up until now, this family still remembers that, and they really felt loved and included in our community.

Since joining my church community and being part of the lives of my neighbors, I realized what it means to truly engage and invest in our relationships. I saw how important it is to know their needs and contextualize what we had learned in the bible. The effectiveness of our ministries does not depend on the tools we use, but in our understanding of our context and the people in our lives.

## CONTEXT AND PEOPLE

I believe that our house church model structure fit our context's need, and I think that it allowed us to have spaces for relationships with each other and make an impact in the lives of our neighbors. I would like to emphasize two things here; first is context and second is people. By understanding our context, our church can tweak things with how our structure should be.

Our church had planted another church in a nearby neighborhood and one of the things our leaders instructed the church planting team, is to take time to get to know the neighborhood. Some of the things that might had worked in our church, might not work there. Context plays an important role in a successful church planting. We need to keep the key principles that works and let the context inform us how do things.

Second is people. We are complex beings, influenced by some many things in our lives. There is no formula in how to make a deep relationship. It needs our time, patience and energy. It is important that we view the people we are reaching out as projects. Most of the time, they would figure it out. Genuine friendship comes out of our genuine curiosity and interest in their lives.

Our house churches' composition is very diverse: students, families, professionals, singles, or married. One reason is for people to be connected by their love for God and not of common interests. We want that our differences will lead us to allow God to work and help us to be united.

One of our pastors said that through her house church, she could see a diverse picture of God. Through her interactions with her house church members, she gets to see God in a different perspective. I believe that one of the beauties of being here is just seeing how different cultures form this diverse and multicultural community.

I strongly believe that we missed out on many opportunities when we neglect to listen to the local people in our neighborhoods or areas of ministry. While there may be practices and traditions that go against biblical teachings and require change, not all aspects of their culture are harmful; some may even prove to be beneficial.

North Before, But Never Without West

Our church has this saying "North before, but never without west," a play of the name of our neighborhood, Nordweststadt which is North-west city in English. North means our vertical relationship with God while west refers to our horizontal relationship with our fellow believers and non-believers. What this mean for us is that while our relationship with God is important, we should not neglect our relationship with others. It also means that we cannot have good relationships with others, without having a deeper relationship with God. True spiritual growth causes strong relationship, both within and outside our faith community.

Living in this neighborhood constantly reminds me of my responsibilities as a missionary and a believer.

I think it is important as believers that we value connecting to our local church community wherever we live and have the longing for our neighbors to come to Christ too. We cannot gatekeep God's love. Our love for God should overflow in our relationships.

The world is constantly changing, and we live in a global society, where people have different perspectives about Christianity and churches. It is important for us to bridge the gap and create communities, where these people would not only hear about us but experience to be part of it. Nowadays, the interactions between the church community and non-believers does not start in the four corners or in the entrance of the church building, it starts in our daily lives. It starts in the interactions in our neighborhood, workplaces and schools.

Our relationships are the starting point for non-believers to get to know us. We cannot just pour our hearts in worship and be filled with God's Spirit and word during a Sunday worship and not allow it to be felt in our interactions with other people. We need to always remember that God is continuously inviting us to play a role in His story.

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# Two Sports as a Model for Intercultural Mission and Theological Education

*Jim Harries*

## INTRODUCTION

Trying to explain a sport such as soccer or tennis to someone who only knows about the other of those sports can provide a model to help understand the difficulties involved in communication between cultures. What are the implications of using this model for facilitating intercultural communication in the realm of theology and mission, especially between the West and Africa? Africans do not have the same cultural and historical background as Westerners, yet they are required to use a Western language when they talk about theological and other issues. Just as soccer players using tennis language may not comprehend what tennis terms actually refer to, Africans do not understand Western concepts and language in the same ways as Westerners do. To compensate—and please their Western teachers and financial supporters—Africans may well imitate what Western missionaries and teachers coach them to speak or think, as a result of which they don't learn to think for themselves. Africans are unable to come to their own culturally appropriate conclusions using Western languages and educational means. This leaves them dependent on Westerners to figure out how to live in a way Westerners will approve. It is hard to accurately describe a soccer match (African ways of life) using only tennis terminology (cf. English). Africans are encouraged to continue with this dysfunctional way of living—imitating Western ways using a Western language—as a result of the incentive of outside finance, better jobs, etc.

In a parallel with our sports analogy, the solution would be for Westerners, as tennis players, to thoroughly immerse themselves in the unfamiliar (to them) sport of soccer, before trying to teach African soccer players how to play tennis. This would enable the Westerner to grasp misunderstandings by soccer players (people rooted in African culture) about the game of tennis (Western ways of life and thinking). Western missionaries thoroughly immersed in African culture and languages without Western financial subsidy, would be able to see how Africans perceive Western theological and societal concepts. Then missionaries could encourage people to think for themselves in their own languages so as to find culturally appropriate ways of living out biblical truths.

## BEING FRANK AND HONEST ABOUT COMMUNICATION PROBLEMS

Frank honesty sometimes cuts across things we

believe to be true. Yet to identify truths that are at loggerheads with Western ways of thinking may benefit the Gospel. High levels of mutual misunderstanding plague relationships between missionaries and African nationals and, to my understanding, many Western missionaries find this embarrassing. I taught 15 years part time at an English medium degree level theological college in Kenya. Grading essays was always challenging. Students arranged words in roughly required ways. They didn't seem to be able to explain things as Westerners would or as I, as instructor had done. If you read their English carefully, many bits of arguments and key terms were included. To fail work because the parts didn't quite make sense, seemed wrong. I did what I think every other Western Bible college tutor does, to give the benefit of the doubt to the African. That avoided appearing racist or implying that African people are not very intelligent. So, I might have awarded, say 80%, to a student who didn't seem to have grasped what they were writing about.

As another example of mutual misunderstanding, sometimes a community may need some program or action to solve a perceived problem, such as shortage of food, or lack of theological education of its leaders. As a missionary you want the plans for resolution to come from the Africans who will implement the plans. You engage the people, often with what to you are open ended questions. You want them to take initiative and be in charge, yet they don't seem to come up with what to a Western missionary seems obvious. They look to you to take the initiative. Eventually, after more probing, and on the basis of what they seem to have said, you suggest a particular direction. They agree, but the reality is, they would never have come to that course of action if you had not been involved and if funding had not been available. Yet, for your publicity, you might well say 'it was their idea'.

Another example of a disconnect in communication is that as a missionary in Africa, I tend to think of ways in which we should work efficiently. But when I pay close attention to translation, the term 'efficiency' is routinely translated into African languages by a term that seems to mean 'good'. On investigation I discovered that efficiency is not a known concept in African ways of life. A key means that helps me to make decisions (the desire for efficiency) is beyond the African community's comprehension! How can that be? What should I do about it?

Whether they like it or not, (Western) missionaries routinely have authority arising from the funds they

have and use to “help” people.<sup>1</sup> Their advice is sought and they give it—I mean, that’s the point of being a missionary—to help other people comprehend how best to live as a Christian. But for reasons already alluded to above, locals don’t understand Westerners and their advice very well. The reason they go along with the need for formal theological and other education may be because it offers prospects for salaries and prestige, rather than it, being something they might think to do of their own accord. Theological education on offer is rooted in Western contexts. Many churches reward people who have engaged in theological education. For some, it is mandatory so as to be a pastor.

The above are some of the puzzling scenarios that I want to address in this article. My understanding of them is profoundly affected by ways I experience the reverse. My own ways of thinking are often received as strange and improbable by my African hosts. That is even after 37 years of my living in their community. For example, my way of examining processes so that they be efficient, perhaps to save time, seems to African colleagues to come from Mars.

My questions to conclude this section: What is going on? What do we need to do about it?

## CULTURES AS SPORTS

Perhaps it would be helpful to make an extended comparison of cultures to sports, like soccer and tennis, and their respective languages. One person’s culture and language is tennis, someone else’s is soccer. What happens in the translation process?

### Translation Experts

Scholars and philosophers have long turned their attention to inter-lingual translation. Cicero (106-43 BC) suggested that translation should be ‘sense for sense’ rather than “word for word.”<sup>2</sup> (Perhaps that was the beginning of a slippery slope?) St. Jerome (AD 347-420) suggested word for word translation for the Bible, but “sense for sense” for other texts.<sup>3</sup> Martin Luther is known for having advocated use of a common language to help people understand the Bible. According to Nida, translation should work by dynamic equivalence, focusing on the effect on a reader rather than the words themselves in the original.<sup>4</sup> Reiss suggests that the dominant function of the source text should determine translation method.<sup>5</sup> Others, such as Juliane-House and later Venuti,

advocated that a translation should sound ‘foreign’.<sup>6</sup>

From the above we can realize that well-known experts on translation emphasize intercultural transmission of meaning or sense. This is for obvious reasons; many actions are interpreted culturally. Translators reason that it is the meaning of an act that counts, and that meaning or impact is what should be translated. My readers may well metaphorically nod their heads at this. It seems to make absolute sense. Unless, that is, if *what is actually done is more important than what it might seem to mean*. Different examples could be used to illustrate this. If someone asks you, “please get me some flowers as a gift to my wife,” then, if flowers are not available, you may think that it is appropriate instead to acquire a box of chocolates. (Meaning based translation would indicate that what is important is to have something that is acceptable as a gift for one’s wife.) But then your friend might explain, ‘no, she has a vase, and wants something to fill it.’ Chocolates are not appropriate. You were required to take the need for flowers literally. This raises the possibility that meaning based translations might be misguided.

For example, we might say a kiss is a sign of love, stamping one’s feet indicates anger, squeezing a tube of toothpaste expresses wanting to brush one’s teeth, slumping in front of a TV for hours indicates depression. So then, instead of saying, “he kissed her,” we could say, “he loved her”; instead of “he stamped his feet,” he was angry; instead of “he squeezed the toothpaste”, he wanted to clean his teeth; and instead of “he slouched in front of the TV,” he was depressed. This assumes the nature of the action performed is unimportant when it comes to translation. It is its meaning that is important (love, anger, wanting to brush one’s teeth, etc.). But what if the nature of the actual action is what is important?

### Intercultural Translation

Let us try doing intercultural translation between sports using the sense or meaning of what is happening. For a serve in tennis to make sense to a soccer player, one can’t talk about rackets, as there are no rackets in soccer. A serve is a means of propelling a ball that opens a game. To translate that sense, we might say that a serve is something like a kick-off in soccer. The problem with this translation process is that serves are frankly very different things to kick-offs! This problem will be apparent to a person familiar with both games. Beyond sports, a kiss may be a sign of hatred rather than love, as when Judas betrayed Jesus. To stamp your foot may be to ask for sugar in tea, and to squeeze a tube of toothpaste may be to declare that it is “time for lunch”! If this might be the case, then “abstracting” actions into meanings or sense in order to translate them might be to entirely miss the point.

I had fun talking to AI on this. The AI bot I used

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6. Venuti, Lawrence, *The Translator’s Invisibility: A History of Translation* (1995).

insisted that translation between soccer and tennis was straightforward. So, in soccer to hit a ball with your foot equals in tennis to hit it with a racket. In soccer for a ball to go into a net is equivalent for it to go over the net in tennis. In soccer a throw in is like a tennis serve, and a pass is in tennis a return in soccer. So simple! Let's see how this works.

In a soccer match there was a throw in. A player passed the ball to a fellow team mate, who had a shot at a goal.

Translated into tennis-speak: A player served, an opposing player passed the ball to his colleague (assuming doubles was being played), who hit it beyond the end of the court. (As a goal in soccer is at the end of a court that is obviously the same as a pitch—or soccer field in American English!).

The AI bot didn't realize the problem with this kind of translation. I was not able to explain the problem to it. The outcome of the translation of what happened in a soccer game could simply not be a description of a tennis match.

In our sports analogy, what happens if Westerners are tennis players and are trying to advise and instruct African people who are soccer players? Westerners' talk of the occasional use of two hands on a tennis racket, for example, will seriously baffle soccer players! Carefully translated advice can make little sense of actions that are specific to particular sports. What Westerners say is simply not what Africans will hear.

### **Linguistic Conclusion: Different Cultural and Historical Backgrounds**

This not making of sense reminds me of ways essays written by my theological students in Kenya did not make sense. To students in the Kenyan theological college at which I taught, their essays were okay. They did not know what they did not know. I realized they were not engaging with the presuppositions on which I was basing my teaching, such as that cause and effect are linear, or that words are used more to express meaning than power.

They knew that the same applied to me, and it would not help them to write to me with respect to their own people's ways of life. For example, their people's ways of life are often guided by ancestors ready to curse those who break taboos the ancestors had put into place. They knew that I could not properly understand that. This no doubt contributed to their discouraging me from teaching in the light of who they were. It was harder for them to realize (or concede) that as I did not understand them, they did not understand me either.

Instead, they tried to write with respect to presuppositions with which they were unfamiliar. They were soccer players who were expected to articulate things in the light of tennis, of which they knew little. From a position of being unfamiliar with Western culture, they were expected to articulate theological truth in a way that would make sense to

it. They could not do this, as they were unfamiliar with the presuppositions they were supposed to be engaging. Presuppositions such as that efficiency is needed in church management, and that the role of spirits (ancestors) should be disregarded. In our sports analogy, presuppositions by the Westerner that the African was unaware of could be that a ball was to be hit by a racket, and that the net is located in the middle of the pitch (court).

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**I believe Westerners need to carefully consider many implications of the above thoughts and conclusions.**

**Leaving Africans dependent on Westerners to figure out how to apply God's Word in their context can lead to culturally inappropriate solutions to issues African's face, such as envy and witchcraft. In the West, not believing in witchcraft is achieved by undermining faith in the supernatural. In Africa known to me, witchcraft in many ways is simply an outworking of envy.**

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Being unfamiliar with Western history and culture, students who wanted to succeed in their classes were forced to copy (plagiarize) or guess. They were playing soccer, even while I was trying to teach them how to play tennis! The difference is important. Intercultural translation wasn't working. They weren't going to admit that, as to them they were doing what was expected, and could be rewarded handsomely for doing so (positions in the church, salary, and so on). But was I helping them to think for themselves, or to follow me blindly?

### **PRESCRIPTIVE CONCLUSION**

I believe Westerners need to carefully consider many implications of the above thoughts and conclusions. Leaving Africans dependent on Westerners to figure out how to apply God's Word in their context can lead to culturally inappropriate solutions to issues African's face, such as envy and witchcraft. In the West, not believing in witchcraft is achieved by undermining faith in the supernatural. In Africa known to me, witchcraft in many ways is simply an outworking of envy.

The reason for Westerners' widespread assumption that their English theological education is appropriate for intercultural use—if necessary through translation,—may be because it comes with all kinds of (often hidden) subsidy. Engaging with people relevantly where they are without incentivizing them to follow someone else's lead, is much more difficult.



Unfortunately, the very subsidized education the West provides can draw attention away from relevant indigenous ways of engaging issues, fossilizing African practices. I experienced this graphically myself when a more indigenously guided theological education program using local languages was squeezed out of existence by much more lucrative foreign-funded English-language alternatives.

To say, “just leave locals to do education and problem solving for themselves,” is not good enough. This is because the Western-subsidized version is more and more widely available, and more and more widely taken as the norm. African people won’t ignore the West. They need to imitate Western education so as to be accepted in the global system. In East Africa one hears murmuring that governments will insist that to be called a church pastor one must have undergone Western theological education using English. African pastors need money that Westerners often have access to.

The question arises whether there ought not be a place for education that is other than Western-subsidized, so that people can learn to think for themselves and build on what they are thinking. I believe it is vital for Westerners to bite the bullet and commit themselves to seriously engaging contextualization while in situ, using indigenous tongues, while a part of local cultures. This is called Vulnerable Mission. Only then can they begin to make deep and helpful contributions to local contexts, and avoid being distractions who are followed for their money.

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