



Vanguard  
Journal of  
Theology &  
Ministry

Volume 1:1 | Spring 2022

[VJTM.VANGUARDCOLLEGE.COM](http://VJTM.VANGUARDCOLLEGE.COM)

# *Vanguard Journal of Theology and Ministry*



---

## ABOUT US

The Vanguard Journal of Theology and Ministry (VJTM) is an open-access journal dedicated to publishing the scholarly works of students, scholars, and practitioners. It is based out of Vanguard College, an evangelical Bible college affiliated with the Pentecostal Assemblies of Canada (PAOC) in Edmonton, Alberta. Issues are published once a year and are peer-reviewed in a double-blind process. The VJTM welcomes original scholarship in the fields of theology and applied ministry.

### ***Editorial Team***

Karina Dunn, Library Director  
Cayla Thorlakson, Interim Editor in Chief, Secretary  
James MacKnight, Editor  
Hilary Warnock, Editor

### ***Open Access Policy***

Vanguard Journal of Theology & Ministry (VJTM) is a diamond open access journal that provides immediate open access to its content on the principle that making research freely available to the public supports the greater global exchange of knowledge. All articles are published under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License.

### ***Copyright Policy***

Work published in VJTM is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License. The CC BY 4.0 license allows others to distribute, remix, tweak, and build upon the Work, even commercially, as long as they credit the Author for the original creation. Authors retain copyright of their Work, with first publication rights granted to VJTM.

Authors will never be charged to submit or publish a manuscript through Vanguard Journal of Theology & Ministry.



# TABLE OF CONTENTS

---

1 - Editorial

## FEATURE

3 – Alumni Author Spotlight

4 – *margins* (Art feature)

## ARTICLES

6 – Stewarding Online Space in Making Disciples of Gen-Z

*Dylan E. Armstrong, BTh, ML (in progress)*

16 – Reclaiming the Focus of the 1st Century Church

*Dr. John W. Telman, BTh, MA, D.Min*

28 – The Story of Indigenous Ministry in Alberta

*Cayla D. Thorlakson, BThPCC*

## REVIEWS

38 – Canadian Pentecostal Reader

*James M. MacKnight, BATH, MATH, PhDTh (in progress)*

40 – Human Freedom, Divine Knowledge, and Mere Molinism

*Dr. Gordon R. Smith, BSW, MSW, DRS*

## CREATIVE

42 – Dying to Us (Art & Prose)

*Anonymous*

46 – The Hour of Salvation (Creative Nonfiction)

*Joel D. Bendixen*

48 – Weakness is a Virtue (Creative Reflection)

*Anonymous*

51 – When the Son had Risen (Poetry)

*Dr. John W. Telman*

## *A Note from the Editors*



---

Truly there is nothing more exciting than watching something that you barely allowed yourself to dream about years before finally coming to life before your eyes. Looking back at this story I see the theme of our current issue so vividly - using the past to inform the future.

As a Master of Library Studies student at the University of Alberta, I (Karina) attended a peer review workshop in the fall of 2018 and was part of starting a journal with other likeminded library students. While participating in peer review, I was hit with the realization that Vanguard College students might also like the opportunity to publish their work. Who wants to pour hours of time, energy, and effort into a research paper that you simply throw away after it is graded? I used my past experiences as an editorial board member and peer reviewer on this library journal to inform the future of a journal at Vanguard College.

A year or so after this first venture into academic publishing as a peer reviewer and editorial board participant, I started approaching faculty about the idea of incorporating journal publishing into their course work here at Vanguard. The complexity of setting up a system to handle this kind of publishing was a bit daunting. However, the University of Alberta has an open access publishing platform that they are not only willing to share with other institutions, but they also provide the support and training editorial boards need to get a journal started. After some discussion with digital initiative librarians in publishing at the University of Alberta, I concluded that one publication for the whole school would be the wisest course of action. In this way, we are using those librarians' past experiences to inform our future.

After mentioning the idea to a handful of students and alumni, enough excitement was generated to have our inaugural meeting in the spring of 2021. I would like to thank each person in attendance at that meeting for their contributions to what would become the scope and vision of this journal. We knew we wanted a mix of readers and authors at a variety of scholarly levels. Highlighting the intersection of theology and applied ministry, we dreamed of an open-access journal dedicated to publishing the scholarly works of students, scholars, and practitioners. This journal would allow current students to publish their hard work on assignments while also encouraging pastors/practitioners to continue thinking about, discussing, and publishing theology. Reciprocally, scholars also get to interact with perspectives from the trenches of ministry, and both pastors and scholars get to benefit from the fresh perspectives of students. Essentially, all three groups interact with the scholarly conversation together and use their collective past to inform each other's futures.

We remain rooted in our affiliation with Vanguard College and the Pentecostal Assemblies of Canada, participating in the College's mission to "develop and mobilize Spirit empowered leaders to be fruitful in God's mission." We also welcome participants to the academic conversation that are not affiliated with Vanguard College or the PAOC, but still desire to engage with the intersection of theology and applied ministry within their field or denomination.

Therefore, the stated goals of the Vanguard Journal of Theology and Ministry (VJTM) are to:

- ∞ provide students the opportunity to contribute their perspective to academic discussion
- ∞ encourage pastors and practitioners to engage in theological and scholarly discussion
- ∞ promote the integration of theological study with applied ministry experience

From here, our vision grew to encompass a broad array of submission types to appeal to all three categories of authors and readers that we wanted to serve. Each issue engages an annual theme from a variety of perspectives. What you now hold in your hand is a reflection of this variety. You have peer-reviewed articles from alumni practitioners alongside creative nonfiction, poetry, and art. All of these publications should cause your heart to pause and consider, how will you use the past to inform the future? Can you feel the momentum building?

You may notice that not all the books in our book review section are directly related to the topic of studying history. We included them because all books written and published contribute to the scholarly conversation on their chosen topic, essentially becoming part of the past that informs our future as soon as we read them.

In many ways, this year's theme arose naturally from Vanguard College's 75th anniversary celebrations. It is an honour to publish our first issue alongside this momentous occasion. Using the past to inform the future is a powerful way to reflect on the faithfulness of God while looking forward to what He has in store for us next. This is how we build momentum.

*“Remember the days of old; consider the years of many generations; ask your father, and he will show you, your elders, and they will tell you” Deuteronomy 32:7, NIV*

*“For everything that was written in the past was written to teach us, so that ... we might have hope” Romans 15:4, NIV*

We press on towards the future with hope, knowing that we face many of the same challenges we have overcome before. We will continue recruiting volunteer authors to submit their work, peer reviewers to review it, editorial board members to publish it, and readers to read it. In all of this we remain confident that God's faithfulness to see this dream started will also see it through.

We have separated our inaugural volume into two issues this year in order to present this first issue at the open house event on graduation weekend in April while still planning for the regularly scheduled issue to release in September.

This would not have been possible without the incredible contributions of the following individuals: Bradley Baker, Kaylee Craig, Jillian Fast, James MacKnight, Tiffany-Marie McPhate (nee Sloboda), Joshua Richardson, Cayla Thorlakson, Joshua VanZandbeek, Hilary Warnock, and Daniel Zander. Thank you for the time and energy you contributed to the development of this journal in a variety of ways over the last year, and especially over the last few weeks.

We would also like to thank all our peer reviewers, without whom we would not have succeeded in including pastor/practitioner articles in this issue. You know who you are! Scholarship cannot thrive without the invaluable feedback you provide to one another. We are especially grateful for your assistance with the tight turn arounds to get this first issue ready.

And thank you, readers! We hope that you find inspiration and motivation in these pages. As this publication becomes part of the past, use it to inform your future.

Karina Dunn, Library Director

Cayla Thorlakson, Interim Editor in Chief, Secretary

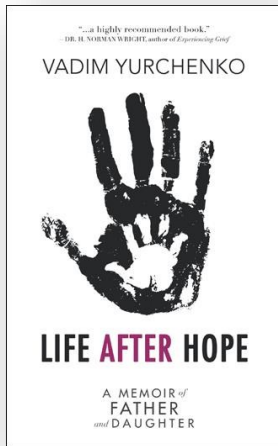
James MacKnight, Editor

Hilary Warnock, Editor

# VANGUARD COLLEGE ALUMNI

## AUTHOR SPOTLIGHT

*Featuring titles published within the last year by Vanguard College Alumni!*

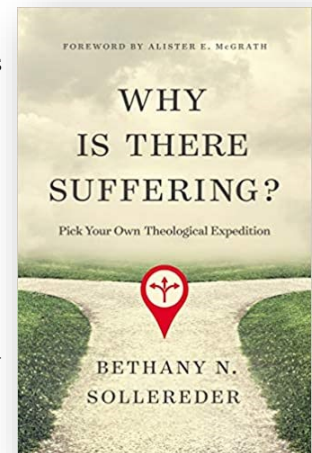


A spiritual travelogue through one of the darkest valleys of parenthood, this book is about a young father's journey of experiencing the unexpected loss of his daughter. Born prematurely, Eleni Hope developed a chronic lung disease that left her with no chance at survival. Through the pangs of grief, unanswered questions, and shattered dreams, the father struggles to find meaning in the tragic circumstances of his daughter's life. Refusing to settle for a life with no Hope, he and his wife discover a new kind of reality- Life After Hope

**Vadim Yurchenko** (class of 2013), is a pastor at Evangel Downtown in British Columbia and adjunct faculty at Vanguard College. He and his wife Mary have three children. To follow more of their journey, visit [www.reimaginehope.com](http://www.reimaginehope.com)

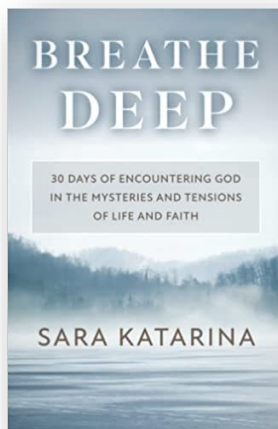
Similar to a 'choose-your-own-adventure' novel, readers will face multiple possibilities regarding suffering and its theological explanations and have to make choices about which one they find most plausible. Each decision will lead to further complexities and new choices, helping readers see how theological choices lead to certain conclusions. This book does not offer final answers. Instead, it introduces the "theological" possibilities, both Christian and non-Christian, that readers can explore and wrestle with so they can make informed decisions about their own beliefs.

**Bethany Sollereeder** (class of 2007), is a postdoctoral fellow at the University of Oxford and regularly writes for journals and popular publications including *Christian Century* and BioLogos.org.



Breathe Deep seeks to help you go deeper with God by making you more aware of His presence already in your midst. It provides you with the space to ask tough questions and encourages you to live in the tensions of life and faith through poetry, reflection and prayer. Life is beautiful and messy, it is full of hope and sorrow. Living in these tensions can be difficult, but you do not have to do it alone. What is stopping you from finding God in your questions and doubts?

**Sara Katarina** (Kate Wiens, class of 2022) has a Bachelor of Theology in Children's and Family ministry, minoring in Intercultural Studies. She loves asking tough questions and uncovering the answers. For her, the joy is in the process of finding an answer, not in the answer itself. She is also always up for a good conversation about any topic.



Have you graduated from Vanguard College and recently published a book?

We'd love to feature it in our next issue. Please send an email to [vjtm@vanguardcollege.com](mailto:vjtm@vanguardcollege.com)

## Creative Submission: Painting



---

### margins

Isaiah Ganesh, Vanguard College Student, 2022

---

Vastness (Gk. *aperantosýni*): the quality or state of being very large;

This painting represents the uniqueness of God's call: unexplainable, but with many details. The audience should envision what it means to be in the center of God's will. Students at Vanguard College know that, at times, following God's vision and purpose feels like how the backdrop of the painting looks: We may not know where we are going, but we wait with expectancy and patience amidst the grand yet gentle voice of the Holy Spirit.

The four paintings are one:

The first one shows unique lines

*(what God is calling you to, is specific only to you),*

The second shows a rapid pulsation of movements as a flood in one direction

*(God's grace will flow with and follow you),*

The third revolves around rough black lines, but shows vibrancy

*(though the journey is rough, God will be with you),*

The final one shows the broadness of the will of God

*(we will not understand everything, but we can focus on the compartments of ministry that God is leading us to in the right time - step-by-step).*

The word "Margins" is the focal (center) point of the painting. The idea is that "margins need to become a reality for us, for us to finish well" (MacKnight, personal communication, February 24, 2022). Margins are about us prioritizing how we spend our time. May this be a reminder that time spent wisely is mandatory for achieving effective results in ministry. It all begins with margins, and then on to the broadness of what God is calling us into. Jesus reveals His plan when we align ourselves to Him (James 4:8, Amos 3: 7).

Finally, the flame in the colour beige commemorates the 75th anniversary of Vanguard College (previously known as Northwest Bible College).

I hope this painting brings a sense of peace to you, knowing that the will of God is not a puzzle we can solve, but a canvas in which God has all the details and we do not. Trust Him in the times of hard ministry, but also rejoice in times of thanksgiving. Through it all, let margins prevail.

This painting was inspired by Rev. Mark MacKnight's class on margins in Pastoral Life Issues. It has been donated to Vanguard College and is available to view in the Library foyer.







## Stewarding Online Space in Making Disciples of Gen-Z



Dylan E. Armstrong, Vanguard College Alumni.<sup>1</sup>

---

**ABSTRACT:** *The western church is experiencing a steady decline in membership with each passing generation. If Jesus is the only way, truth, and life available, then seeing fewer people come into life with Him should be very alarming for the Church today, and a major concern to address. How can the Church re-engage youth in today's post-Christian culture? As Gen-Zs are digital natives with much of their experiences being lived out online, what role should the online environment play in the Church in reengaging today's generation of young people? How can churches effectively disciple young people they may never meet in person? What answers might the field of education have to offer practical ministry in these questions? The purpose of this literature review is to examine the available scholarship related to online discipleship and the Gen-Z generation, including how faith nurture, church, community development, learning, and online collaborative learning theory can be understood within the online context. It will also look at the model of traditional discipleship and examine whether the online world is an appropriate place for such discipleship practices. Finally, this paper will offer suggestions based on the literature as to how one may leverage online collaborative learning practices to engage effectively in online discipleship with Gen-Z individuals in a small group setting.*

**KEYWORDS:** *Online Discipleship, Online Church, Online Learning, Generation-Z, Digital Discipleship, Small Group Ministry, Online Small Group, Youth Ministry*

---

With the World Health Organization declaring the Coronavirus a worldwide pandemic in March of 2020, churches across Canada were mandated to close their physical doors and instead set up shop in online spaces. While some were outfitted for online services before the pandemic hit, for many this was a considerable challenge and change (Plüss, 2020). Although many churches managed to move online in some form (Holmes, 2020), this move for many was a temporary measure, as the community dimension of church is generally viewed through the lens of an in person gathering (Bryson, 2020; Iwuoha, 2020). Doubts about the ability of the local church to be an engaging community online, as opposed to simply streaming services like a televangelist, were quickly validated as zoom fatigue emerged in April of the same year (Bailenson, 2021). Influential voices spoke strongly on these concerns, such as theologian John MacArthur (2021) who asserted, “there is no such thing as a zoom church.”

Although the environment may have significantly changed, the great commission remains the same (Galang & Macaraan, 2021). The church is called to be actively engaged in making disciples of all nations regardless the challenges or platforms. The pandemic may have changed routines, but it has not changed what God requires (Plüss, 2020). Church leaders know that God has called them to “go into *all* [emphasis added] the world and preach the gospel to all creation” (Mark 16:15, NIV). Despite this, they still find themselves asking questions such as, ‘Is it possible to use online media to facilitate the kinds of deep, authentic spiritual formation that are central to theological education in an online context?’ and ‘If it is possible to facilitate spiritual formation online, what can we do to maximize our effectiveness?’ (Flynn, 2013; Holmes 2020, Jun, 2020).

---

<sup>1</sup> Dylan is a pastor from Ottawa who has a Missions Certificate from Vanguard College, a Bachelor of Theology from Masters College and Seminary and is completing a Master’s of Leadership through Prairie College.



Although the pandemic has brought up uncertainty regarding the viability of online discipleship specifically, the western church has also been experiencing problems with faith formation in general. According to Grant (2008), religious affiliation has dropped considerably since the 1950's, with this current generation having lesser religious affiliation than any generation previous (White, 2017; Scheitle, Corcoran & Halligan 2018; Bible Society, 2018). This process is termed by researchers Scheitle, Corcoran & Halligan (2018) as "the rise of the nones," and it has led to Gen-Z becoming the first post-Christian generation, as well as the most atheist generation in recent history (Barna, 2019; White, 2017). Yet, despite Gen-Z having the lowest religious affiliation in recent history (Barna, 2019; White, 2017), research from the Barna Group (2021b) also found that one in four non-Christian students are open and interested in learning more about faith and what it means to their lives. If 25% of Gen-Z is open to discovering more about faith (Barna, 2021b), then what must the Church do to engage in those conversations? Gen-Z must be viewed as the window through which we see the future of the Church, coloured by both their hopes and concerns as well as by the trends which unlock opportunity (Villa, Dorsey, & Bocher, 2020).

The church's decline and its struggle to engage and build relationships with Gen-Z raises the questions as to whether or not the Church is fulfilling the great commission. Bergler (2021) observes that the Church's current practices are failing to engage Gen-Z. As Gen-Z is the first digital generation born into a hyper connected world where the internet was always available (Fromm & Read, 2018; Hashim, 2018), engaging Gen-Z and engaging in discipleship digitally may be more interconnected than previously considered. Contrary to opinions of MacArthur (2021), online technology may precisely be the newest tool God is giving the Church to curb the rise of the nones and re-engage the current and next generations. Consideration of the opportunities the internet offers to both re-engage a lost generation and further the call of Christ to make disciples led to the research question of this essay: How can churches steward online spaces to engage and disciple Gen-Z?

There is a considerable amount of literature available on interacting with online technologies in general, but little on online discipleship specifically. Much of the work that is available to churches for reference are blog posts or podcasts; these more informal sources suggest that this is an area needing further study. Scholarly articles identified by this literature review consisted largely of research on educational science and technologies.

### **The Centrality of Developing Community**

The basic outline of small group ministry in a modern western church is this: A group of people who learn both from a leader and from one another (Ajie, 2019). Whether online or offline, relationships are about dialogue, not monologue (Martin, 2019), and developing a two-way conversation is central to discipleship (Fortin, 2021; Jones, 2021). However, despite this clarity of vision, there is a lack of clarity of methodology, leading to a decline in discipleship and thus a decline in membership. McKnight (2020) suggests that, in order to effectively disciple people, leaders should reexamine the methodology of Jesus.

Dr. Robert Coleman (2006) examines the discipleship methodology of Jesus in *The Master Plan of Evangelism*. One encouragement to be gleaned from his work is that the direction churches are taking with small group ministry is a positive one (Coleman and Harrington, 2014). Coleman (2006) notes that, while Jesus did teach in multiple styles, He devoted the bulk of His time to one approach in particular: small group communities. Jesus' main small group community of His disciples were afforded the opportunity to grow not only under the direct, daily teaching of Jesus, but also from one another (Ajie, 2019). For the purpose of establishing a deeper foundation for developing community, Coleman's (2006) work must be further examined.

### **The Master Plan of Evangelism**

Apart from scripture itself, Coleman's original work is possibly the most influential book written on discipleship to date, warranting a 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary sequel that synthesizes the original content and offers further reflections on it. In a 2006 publication of his original work, Coleman identified eight principles for evangelism: 1) Selection – Jesus' method was people; 2) Association – Jesus stayed with them; 3) Consecration – Jesus required obedience; 4) Impartation – Jesus gave Himself away through the Holy Spirit; 5) Demonstration – Jesus showed them how to live; 6) Delegation – Jesus assigned them work; 7)

Supervision – Jesus continued to check on them; and 8) Reproduction – Jesus expected them to reproduce. Upon revisiting this list in 2014 for the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary edition, Coleman reordered the list to place impartation at the end and added a ninth principle to the start: incarnation – Jesus coming into our world to show us God’s love. He reordered these principles to iterate that discipleship starts with Jesus, the One which whom our faith is built, and ends with the power of the Holy Spirit which empowers and enables us to become more like Jesus.

Coleman’s (2006/2014) steps are deeply rooted in community. It is impossible to choose people, associate with people, require obedience from people, impart the Holy Spirit upon people, demonstrate to people, delegate to people, supervise people, or reproduce yourself in people, apart from people. In other words, to go and make disciples requires a person going and making a disciple of another person. From Coleman’s work, it should be concluded that it is impossible to engage in discipleship, either being or making, apart from community. Community is absolutely central to the discipleship process. Whether or not digital space can be used in discipleship is largely a matter of whether community can be fostered online.

In their research article on the formation of online communities Panek et al. (2018) acknowledge the historic difficulty in trying to measure online community, and suggest that defining what is being measured would add clarity. They offer that online community may be defined as: members who actively participate in and contribute to discourse over a prolonged period of time. For their article, Panek, et al. researched different online communities and conclude that online community can be formed, but that not all communities are of the same quality. Similarly, Campbell (2020) reminds churches that ministry online is about connection, not content. It appears that community remains the driving force of discipleship, including online discipleship. Given that community can be formed online, but not all online community is of the same quality, we are left with the question: How might the Church produce higher quality community online?

### **New Generation of Learners Require a New Approach to Learning**

One way the Church may gain insight into building higher quality community online is by looking to the online generation themselves. Research commissioned by the Bible Society (2018) finds that the digital age has shifted how Gen Y (‘the Millennials’) lives: To meet them in their context means engaging them digitally. Considering how technology plays a larger role for Gen Z than it did for previous generations (Hashim, 2018; Rue, 2018), the Church must understand the increased demand for online discipleship. While teenage discipleship has been widely researched, little research has been done on Gen-Z in relation to digital discipleship. Technology also plays a crucial role in the lives of Gen-Z (Schroth, 2019), dubbed “Generation Screen” or “Screenagers” (Barna, 2021a; Mckee, 2021). As Hashim (2018) observes, this new generation of learners have learning expectations, styles, and needs that are different from past students; they do not do well as passive learners. Further pressing the matter that Gen-Z demands a digital approach, Hashim (2018) observes:

Due to their unique characteristics, Gen-Z has a different need to engage in learning. Gen-Z needs fast delivery of content with complex graphics. They are kinaesthetic, experiential, hands-on learners who prefer to learn by doing rather than being told what to do or by reading text. They also prefer random access, graphics first and connected activities. They have a need for speed and instant gratification. . . due to the unique characteristics of Gen-Z, teachers cannot run away from integrating and applying technology in teaching and learning. For these learners, technology is not considered an accessory to life but is viewed as a way of life. (p.2)

In *Meet Generation Z*, Dr. White (2017) holds that culture sets the tone for communication, dictating what it is and how it is best accomplished for both the speaker and the hearer. White’s assertion explains Hashim’s (2018) observation that teachers cannot avoid integrating technology because culture has deemed it necessary for effective communication. It is imperative for churches to understand that technology has permeated culture so extensively that its influence impacts how students understand, hear, and process content, whether or not it is intentionally integrated. If churches are to be effective at

communicating the gospel and leading students into discipleship, intentional use of technology must be adopted.

Gen-Z, according to Kahn (2015), is the "'internet-in-its-pocket' generation". Kinnaman and Matlock (2019) observe that young people no longer look to parents, pastors or teachers to guide them because the screens in their pockets offer information on anything they could wonder about. Kinnaman and Matlock's observation reveals an important historical shift in the relationship between adults and teenagers. However, the Fuller Youth Institute found in two separate research projects (Powell & Clark, 2011; Powell et al., 2016) that adults still play an essential role in student learning, especially in spiritual development.

Sharma (2017) sees this shift in education as the movement from teacher to facilitator. In the era of self-sufficiency, education is less about teaching the answers and more about guiding students to discover the answers for themselves. However, the need of Gen-Z to engage in learning is not satisfied solely by being involved in the information discovery process; Gen-Z needs a space (community of practice) to test or apply their learning (Wenger, 2011). This should be especially promising for the Church; during the millennial/MTV era it was believed that, that in order to reach young people, they needed to first be entertained. Now with Gen-Z, it appears they simply need to be engaged, much like how Jesus led His group of disciples. The online environment can offer an avenue in which to engage these learners.

### **The Digital Era Demands a Digital Approach**

In 2011, Andrews observed that little recognition had been given to the transformation possible through the internet. Although over a decade has passed, in some ways this observation may still ring true in the church. Despite the opportunity afforded to the Church by technology, simply having an online presence does not equate to having online effectiveness. As Hunt (2019) observed, ministries have missed opportunities to lead and develop people. However, good online leadership is not simply reproducing offline leadership in virtual spaces (Narbona, 2016). Rather, online leadership requires its own, unique leadership understandings and competencies. There is a need to both be online and understand how to be online. Tech is a crucial part of the digital era (Hashim, 2018), and adapting kingdom-advancing work to the online context cannot be done peripherally or without intention (Fromm and Read, 2018; Gillett-Swan, 2017). The challenge before the Church is thus to engage in discipleship with people who are already accustomed to being connected by modern means, both physically and digitally (Hodøl, 2021). As the landscape of how civilization experiences life has evolved, so too must the process of engaging in discipleship.

With the help of COVID-19, churches have once again embraced ministry like Jesus' - existing primarily outside the four walls of a church. Whether or not churches continue to engage online after the pandemic mandates drop remains to be seen. Galang & Macaraan (2021) believe that the Church has shifted to see online as an important pastoral region. Jun (2020) and Mpofu (2021) indicate the importance of leveraging the digital landscape in considering how the Church conducts its mission online. In addition, Ali (2020) challenges the Church by pointing out technological advances in the world which demand a paradigm shift in the way we approach our mission.

In the digital age, the internet is used by individuals to socialize, maintain relationships, and receive emotional support (Campbell & Garner, 2016). For Gen-Z, there is no separation between online and offline life (Mckee, 2021; Palfrey & Gasser, 2020; Stillman & Stillman, 2017), and for churches wanting to disciple the next generation, they too should see no separation. If community is being experienced online, discipleship should be happening there as well, as discipleship should happen anywhere community can be experienced. As Shirley (2017) notes, the substance of a church's call to discipleship has not changed, but the methodology and technology for accomplishing it has. The instruction to go forth and make disciples truly has no geographical or digital boundaries; it is the job of every church to develop a discipleship pathway that will facilitate all people to be in the relational process of discipleship (Puttman, 2014).

Considering how the modern small group model involves few elements without online counterparts, one may come to the conclusion that small groups will be able to translate seamlessly to the

online context as-is. Unfortunately, researchers have yet to evaluate online small groups against in-person small groups. However, regarding education, researchers have found that no area of education has translated seamlessly, and that scales of adaptation must be applied to differentiate between different contexts of teaching online and offline (Gillett-Swan, 2017).

Online learning needs its own approach, one which was designed for an online audience and with online tools in mind. Further to needing to adapt and differentiate from offline to online, teaching and learning systems should be built from the vantage points of the needs of the intended students and learning outcomes (Anderson, 2008). There are, however, concerns with moving towards a more digital approach. One concern noted by Sharma (2017) is that incorporating technology in classrooms does not guarantee that students will use it appropriately; rather, they may use it to distract themselves or others. While concern that technology may cause an added distraction is valid, a disengaged student who needs technology to properly learn is must equally be given consideration. Gillett-Swan (2017) addresses concerns about digital learning, identifying that teaching with technology, similar to teaching in physical spaces, varies based on the types of tech used and the material being addressed.

### ***Collaborative Learning Theory***

Considering a digital approach for the digital era is exactly what Linda Harasim (2012) accomplishes in developing the online collaborative learning theory. The basic outline for the online collaborative learning theory is that individual learners support and add to an emerging pool of knowledge, and the teacher plays a crucial role as both facilitator and member of the knowledge community (Robinson, 2017; Harasim, 2012, Williams, 2015). Online collaborative learning theory, like a traditional small group ministry in a modern western church, also emphasizes developing community:

- Developing community increases teamwork, shared thought, support and commitment toward group outcomes (Chatterjee & Correia, 2019; Robinson, 2017; Saqr et al., 2019);
- Emotion and feeling a sense of community are central to student engagement, satisfaction and academic persistence (Berry, 2019; Phillips & Johnson-Holder, 2018; Jiang & Koo, 2020);
- Students who felt part of community had more social presence and interaction between learners increased (Chatterjee & Correia, 2019; Berry, 2019; Robinson, 2017).

The literature regarding online collaborative learning theory may suggest that a personal investment in the learning community translates into a personal investment into the learning process, which may evolve into a richer, more complete learning experience. In considering the discipleship process, online collaborative learning theory may not only provide a means to effectively disciple people, but may also reveal missing components of current models which have contributed to the decline in church engagement.

In episode 42 of the BETA podcast, Reed (2021) articulates that leaders cannot leverage the strength of the digital environment through one-way communication. Instead, leaders leverage the strength of the digital environment by creating a dialogue space in which others' speaking is truly valued. In a space where the leader models how to listen, students can then learn how to listen through observation and participation. Fortin (2021) addresses how important learning to listen in community is to the process of discipleship by identifying three significant considerations: 1) listening postures the listener to share in the gift of Christ's presence in others, 2) listening provides an opportunity for the listener to practice the love and presence of Jesus to those they are listening to, and 3) growing deeper in ones capacity to listen to others grows ones capacity to listen to God. It may be that a more collaborative approach to discipleship, in which everyone is expected to contribute to the pool of knowledge by sharing the gift of Christ from within oneself, is paramount in today's age. Furthermore, learning to listen will not only enable one to participate more fully in community, but will also inadvertently begin the realignment addressed by Bingham (2021), leading us from merely an intellectual faith to an applied faith - which discipleship requires.

In *The Third Education Revolution*, Sommer (2021) similarly emphasizes the need for a collaborative approach in discipleship, concluding that Christians "should learn to encourage one another to put the scriptures in practice, making the Christian walk both a collective and an individual endeavor" (p. 191). In

*Irresistible Community*, Donahue (2015) asserts that there is no life change without community. Applying Donahue's assertions against the backdrop of discipleship, evidence is likely to support that people are more spiritually impacted when they are more socially engaged in the community. Perhaps The Lord said "it is not good for man to be alone" (Genesis 2:18) because holistic impact is best achieved within the context of collaborative community.

### **Online Faith Nurture**

Holmes (2020) notes that connection and collaboration are foundational components of learning even when learning is online, and that relationships are an integral part of online faith nurture. Campbell (2020) further emphasizes the importance of relationships in online faith nurture by listing six key markers for a successful religious online community:

1. Relationships: A place where people feel known and supported, centered around a common purpose of social relations and friendships
2. Care: A place where people give and receive support and encouragement to one another, requesting care and receiving counsel for dealing with various issues.
3. A Sense of Being Appreciated: A place for people to feel known, seen and loved for who they are and what they offer to the community.
4. A Safe Place: A place where people can be open and have intimate conversations.
5. Trusted Connections: A place for people to experience deep, meaningful connection with others.
6. Shared Faith: A place to explore and grow with Jesus and others in their social network.

Considering both Holmes' and Campbell's observations on the importance of relationships, it follows that developing quality community, connection, and collaboration in an online faith context is imperative to successful digital discipleship.

### **Conclusion**

Although churches did establish online discipleship as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, there is a difference between emergency online discipleship and effective online discipleship. In order for churches to shift from the former to the latter, digital space must not be treated as temporary or separate from regular spaces of human interaction, communication, and dialogue, but rather, as a permanent and essential component of it (Galang & Macaraan, 2021). Churches must not lose sight of discipleship as a community endeavor, or a mission to invite people into the body of believers, but must recognize the opportunities found in digital spaces for healthy participation in community (Hunt, 2021). The church must not forget how community was known in the Bible as a purposeful gathering of believers (White, 2017), and must continue to seek to build His Kingdom purposefully and intentionally.

If spiritual community is able to be as real online as it is offline (Campbell, 2020), then it should be embraced and celebrated for the doors it opens (Kinnaman & Matlock, 2019). Gen-Z places high priority on personal growth and development (Rodriguez, Boyer, Fleming & Cohen, 2019), and technology provides increased learning opportunities (Donohue & Schomburg, 2017). Therefore, churches should be involved in online ministry as a way to help curb 'the rise of the nones' (White, 2017; Scheitle, Corcoran & Halligan, 2018) and attract students to engage anew (Schwieger & Ladwig, 2018). Finally, churches looking to maximize the learning opportunities afforded by online spaces should look to the field of education to gain insight into effective teaching models. In particular, the Church can learn from the Harasim's (2012) online collaborative learning theory. Employing online collaborative learning theory practices may provide Gen-Z with the constructive, experiential, and collaborative learning opportunities they require in order to most effectively develop a growing faith in Jesus.

In conclusion, churches and church leaders must remember that for Jesus, discipleship was not theoretical, it was a way of life (Coleman & Harrington, 2014). The Church needs to engage online as well as offline to make disciples in both the digital age and the age to come (Kinnaman & Matlock, 2019). As stated by author Selladurai in *Third education revolution: From home school to church college* (2021), "It's time we harness the power of technology in fulfilling the great commission" (p. 125).

## References

- Ajje, I. (2019). Knowledge sharing used by Jesus: A model for the 21<sup>st</sup> century information professional. *Library Philosophy and Practice (e-journal)*, 2522. <https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/libphilprac/2522>
- Ali, W. (2020). Online and remote learning in higher education institutes: A necessity in light of covid-19 pandemic. *Higher Education Studies*, 10(3), 16-25. <https://doi.org/10.5539/hes.v10n3p16>
- Anderson, T. (Ed.). (2008). *The theory and practice of online learning*. Athabasca University Press.
- Andrews, R. (2011). Does e-learning require a new theory of learning? Some initial thoughts. *Journal for Educational Research Online*, 3(1), 104-121.
- Bailenson, J.N. (2021). Nonverbal overload: A theoretical argument for the causes of zoom fatigue. *Technology, Mind, and Behavior*, 2(1). <https://doi.org/10.1037/tmb0000030>
- Barna. (2019). *Reviving evangelism: Current realities that demand a new vision for sharing faith*. Barna Group.
- Barna. (2021a). *Gen z volume 2: Caring for young souls and cultivating resilience*. Barna Group.
- Barna. (2021b). *Reviving evangelism in the next generation*. Barna Group.
- Bergler, T.E. (2020). Generation z and spiritual maturity. *Christian Education Journal*, 17(1), 75-91.
- Berry, S. (2019). Teaching to connect: Community-building strategies for the virtual classroom. *Online Learning*, 23(1), 164-183. <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ1210946.pdf>
- Bible Society. (2018). *Digital millennials and the bible*. <https://www.durham.ac.uk/media/durham-university/research-/research-centres/centre-for-digital-theology/documents/DigitalMillennialsandtheBible-finalversion.pdf>
- Bingham, M.C. (2021). Brains, bodies, and the task of discipleship: Re-aligning anthropology and ministry. *Themelios*, 46(1), 37-54.
- Bryson, J.R., Andres, L., & Davies, A. (2020). Covid-19, virtual church services and a new temporary geography of home. *Journal of Economic and Human Geography*, 111(3), 360-372. <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/epdf/10.1111/tesg.12436>
- Campbell, H.A. (2005). *Exploring religious community online: We are one in the network*. Peter Lang Publishing.
- Campbell, H.A. (2020). The distanced church: Reflections on doing church online. *Digital Religion Publications*. <https://oaktrust.library.tamu.edu/bitstream/handle/1969.1/187891/Distanced%20Church-PDF-landscape-FINAL%20version.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y>
- Campbell, H. A. & Garner, S. (2016). *Networked theology: Negotiating faith in a digital culture*. Baker Academic.
- Chatterjee, R. & Correia, A. (2019). Online students' attitude toward collaborative learning and sense of community. *American Journal of Distance Education*, 34(1), 53-68. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08923647.2020.1703479>
- Coleman, R. E. (2006). *The master plan of evangelism*. Baker Books.
- Coleman, R. E., Harrington, B. & Patrick, J. (2014). *Revisiting the master plan of evangelism: Why Jesus' discipleship method is still the best today*. Exponential Resources.
- Donahue, B. (2015). *The irresistible community: An invitation to life together*. Baker Books.

- Donohue, C. and Schomburg, R. (2017). Technology and interactive media in early childhood programs. *YC Young Children*, 72(4), 72–78. <https://www.naeyc.org/resources/pubs/yc/sep2017/technology-and-interactive-media>
- Flynn, J. T. (2013). Digital discipleship: Christian education in a digital world. *Christian Education Journal*, 10(1), 88-89. <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/073989131301000106>.
- Fortin, J.P. (2021). Christian discipleship as compassionate listening: Learning to be human in times of a pandemic. *Touchstone*, 39(1), 28-39.
- Fromm, J. & Read, A. (2018). *Marketing to gen z: The rules for reaching this vast – and very different – generation of influencers*. AMACOM.
- Galang, J.R.F. & Macaraan, W.E.R. (2021). Digital apostleship: Evangelization in the new agora. *Religions*, 12(2), 92. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel12020092>
- Gillett-Swan, J. (2017). The challenges of online learning: Supporting and engaging the isolated learning. *Journal of Learning Design*, 10(1), 20-30. <https://eprints.qut.edu.au/102750/1/293-749-1-PB.pdf>.
- Grant, J.T. (2008). Measuring aggregate religiosity in the United States, 1952-2005. *Sociological Spectrum*, 28(5), 460-476.
- Hashim, H. (2018). Application of technology in the digital era education. *International Journal of Research in Counseling and Education*, 2(1), 1-5. <http://ppsfp.ppj.unp.ac.id/index.php/ijrice/article/view/2>.
- Holmes, S. E. (2020). An exploration of online Christian faith nurture for children. *International Journal of Christianity & Education*, 25(2), 169-183. <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/2056997120965989>.
- Hodøl, H. (2021). What a friend we have in Facebook: Norwegian Christian churches' use of social media. *Journal of Media and Religion*, 20(3), 123-142. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15348423.2021.1954829>
- Hunt, J. G. (2019). The digital way: Re-imagining digital discipleship in the age of social media. *Journal of Youth and Theology*, 18(2), 91-112. [https://brill.com/view/journals/jyt/18/2/article-p91\\_91.xml](https://brill.com/view/journals/jyt/18/2/article-p91_91.xml).
- Hunt, J. (2021). Righteousness and truth: Framing dignity of persons and digital discipleship as religious educational forms of response to cyberbullying. *Religions and Theologies*, 12(4), 227. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel12040227>.
- Iwuoha, C.M.A. (2020). Corona virus disease: Impact on the church and society. *Journal of African Studies and Sustainable Development*. 3(12), 88-103. <https://acjol.org/index.php/jjrp/article/view/1217>
- Jiang, M., & Koo, K. (2020). Emotional presence in building an online learning community among non-traditional graduate students. *Online Learning Journal*, 24(4), 93-111. <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ1277442.pdf>.
- Jones, B. (2021, February 23). Developing a digital discipleship pathway. *ABNWT*. <https://abnwt.com/articles/developing-a-digital-discipleship-pathway>
- Jun, G. (2020). Virtual reality church as a new mission frontier in the metaverse: Exploring theological controversies and missional potential of virtual reality church. *Transformation*, 37(4), 297-305
- Kahn, B. (2015). 'Millennials on Steroids': Is Your Brand Ready for Generation Z? *Knowledge at Wharton*. <https://knowledge.wharton.upenn.edu/article/millennials-on-steroids-is-your-brand-ready-for-generation-z/>
- Kinnaman, D. & Matlock, M. (2019). *Faith for the exiles: 5 ways for a new generation to follow Jesus in digital Babylon*. Baker Books.



- MacArthur, J. (2021, Sept 30). *The Suffering Servant* (Session 5). G3 Conference, Atlanta, GA.
- Martin, J. (2019). Building relationships and increasing engagement in the virtual classroom: Practical tools for the online instructor. *Journal of Educators Online*, 16(1). <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=EJ1204379>.
- Mckee, J. (2021). *Parenting generation screen: Guiding your kids to be wise in a digital age*. Focus on the Family.
- McKnight, S. (2020). *A church called tov: Forming a goodness culture that resists abuses of power and promotes healing*. Tyndale Momentum.
- Mpofu, B. (2021). Transversal modes of being a missional church in the digital context of covid-19. *HTS Theologiese Studies / Theological Studies* 77(4). <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v77i4.6341>
- Narbona, J. (2016). Digital leadership, twitter, and pope francis. *Church Communication and Culture* 1(1), 90-109. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/23753234.2016.1181307>
- Palfrey, J. & Gasser, U. (2020). *The connected parent: An expert guide to parenting in a digital world*. Basic Books.
- Panek, E., Hollenbach, C., Yang, J., & Rhodes, T. (2018). The effects of group size and time on the formation of online communities: Evidence from reddit. *Social Media and Society*, 4(4), 1-11. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2056305118815908>
- Phillips, B., & Johnson-Holder, A. (2018). Using technology to enhance teacher-student relationships and engagement in the online higher education classroom. *American International Journal of Humanities and Social Science*, 4(4), 5-8. <http://ajhss.cgrd.org/images/Vol4No4/2.pdf>.
- Powell, K.E. & Clark, C. (2011). *Sticky faith: Everyday ideas to build lasting faith in your kids*. Zondervan.
- Powell, K.E., Mulder, J., & Griffin, B. (2016). *Growing young: Six essential strategies to help young people discover and love your church*. Baker Books.
- Puttman, J. (2014). *Real life discipleship: Building churches that make disciples*. Tyndale House Publishers.
- Reed, J. (2021, Sept 9). Tips for better online small groups. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=67evZ9mhtIc>
- Robinson, H.A., Kilgore, W. & Warren, S.J. (2017). Care, communication, learner support: Designing meaningful online collaborative learning. *Online Learning* 21(4), 29-51. <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ1163608.pdf>
- Rodriguez, M., Boyer, S., Fleming, D. & Cohen, S. (2019). Managing the next generation of sales, gen z/millennial cusp: An exploration of grit, entrepreneurship, and loyalty. *Journal of Business-to-Business Marketing*, 26(1), 43-55. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1051712X.2019.1565136>
- Rue, P. (2018). Make way, millennials, here comes gen z. *About Campus*, 23(3), 5-12. <https://doi.org/10.1177%2F1086482218804251>
- Saqr, M., Nouri, J., & Jormanainen, I. (2019). A learning analytics study of the effect of group size on social dynamics and performance in online collaborative learning. In: Scheffel M., Broisin J., Pammer-Schindler V., Ioannou A., Schneider J. (eds). *Transforming Learning with Meaningful Technologies*. EC-TEL 2019. Lecture Notes in Computer Science, vol 11722. Springer, Cham. [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-29736-7\\_35](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-29736-7_35)
- Scheitle, C., Corcoran, K.E., Halligan, C. (2018). The rise of the nones and the changing relationships between identity, belief, and behavior. *Journal of Contemporary Religion*, 33(3), 567-579. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13537903.2018.1535379>

- Schroth, H. (2019). Are you ready for gen z in the workplace? *California Management Review*, 61(3), 5-18. <https://doi.org/10.1177%2F0008125619841006>
- Schwieger, D. & Ladwig, C. (2018). Reaching and retaining the next generation: Adapting to the expectations of gen-z in the classroom. *Information Systems Education Journal*, 16(3), 45-54
- Selladurai, G. (2021). God's mandate becomes the e-mandate. In Mangalwadi, V., Marshall, D.(Eds), *Third education revolution: From home school to church college* (pp. 124-133). Sought After Media. Kindle Edition
- Sharma, M. (2017). Teacher in a digital age. *Global Journal of Computer Science and Technology*, 17(3). <https://computerresearch.org/index.php/computer/article/view/1633>
- Shirley, C. (2017). Overcoming digital distance: The challenge of developing relational disciples in the internet age. *Christian Education Journal*, 14(2), 376-390.
- Sommer, G. (2021). The pietist origin of the modern university. In Mangalwadi, V., Marshall, D.(Eds), *Third education revolution: From home school to church college* [Kindle Edition] (pp. 186-202). Sought After Media.
- Stillman, D., & Stillman, J. (2017). *Gen-Z @ work: How the next generation is transforming the workplace*. HarperCollins Publishers.
- Villa, D., Dorsey, J. & Bocher, J. (2020). *The state of gen z: The impact of covid19 and gen z looking ahead*. The Centre for Generational Kinetics. <https://genhq.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/State-of-Gen-Z-2020-Covid-19.pdf>
- Wenger, E. (2011). Communities of practice: A brief introduction. *National Science Foundation*. <http://hdl.handle.net/1794/11736>
- White, J.E. (2017). *Meet generation z: Understanding and reaching the new post-christian world*. Baker Books.
- Williams, M. (2015). Community, discipleship, and social media. *Christian Education Journal*, 12(2), 375-383. <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/073989131501200209>.

## Reclaiming the Focus of the 1st Century Church



Dr. John W. Telman, Vanguard College Alumni.<sup>1</sup>

---

**ABSTRACT:** *The church of the 21st century frequently looks to the example of its predecessor found described in the book of Acts. Even though the early church experienced numerous difficulties including church discipline, persecution, and forging procedures for representing Christ properly, the present-day church looks back with a yearning for equal effectiveness missionally. Some will define effectiveness by the numbers of people added to the church. Others will counter with observable results including the countless healings, exorcisms, and bold preaching. Yet, today's church is often drawn to a social agenda. One cannot sustain a complaint that a social agenda is excluded from the life of the fledgling church. Luke wrote that "there was not a needy person among them" (Acts 4:34 NASB). This was the life of the church but what of their missional efforts? Did the early church also care for the community's needs and why? This paper will explore what may have motivated the 1st century church that could be missing in the 21st century. The investigation of scripture will go beyond the book of Acts. It will largely touch on not only the teaching but also the habits of the church which could be chosen as a model for the present day and the future church. An important question to be answered is, "has the church today replaced the foundational focus held by the early church and if so, is there a legitimate reason for doing so?"*

**KEYWORDS:** *God, Jesus Christ, Church, Twenty-first Century, Missional, Pastoral, Church Trends*

---

Reclaiming a focus infers that what once was driving the church has been lost or at least is not active as it was in the first century. This focus can quickly be understood as witnessing to the coming of Jesus Christ.

The first to focus on Jesus the Son is God the Father. "God, after He spoke long ago to the fathers in the prophets in many portions and in many ways, in these last days has spoken to us in His Son, whom He appointed heir of all things through whom also He made the world" (Hebrews 1:1-2). John Stott writes, "supremely, he spoke in his Son, his 'Word . . . made flesh', and in his Word's words, whether spoken directly or through his apostles."<sup>2</sup> Stott also proclaims, "We must speak what he has spoken."<sup>3</sup>

The mission of God's people, writes Christopher J. H. Wright, is "to make God known."<sup>4</sup> A survey of the New Testament will show that the early church was prolific at doing so. This article will highlight the select instructions and examples given by the writers of scripture to fulfill the words of Jesus when he prophesied that, "you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth" (Acts 1:8).

Speaking of Acts 1:8, Wright states that

this probably refers primarily to the special place of the original disciples/apostles as eyewitnesses of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus himself. However, I was taught (rightly I think) that even

---

<sup>1</sup> John W. Telman, D. Min. is a graduate of Vanguard (NBC '84) where he earned a Bachelor of Theology. He's authored five published books and has been a pastor for 28 years in Canada, the USA and Singapore.

<sup>2</sup> John R. W. Stott, *The Art of Preaching in the Twentieth Century* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1994), 15.

<sup>3</sup> Stott, *The Art of Preaching in the Twentieth Century*, 15.

<sup>4</sup> Christopher J. H. Wright, *The Mission of God's People: A Biblical Theology of the Church's Mission* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010), 164.



though the apostolic witness had a unique function in authenticating New Testament Christianity, witnessing to Christ was something that went beyond the apostles. All following generations of believers were enlisted in the ongoing task of bearing witness to the same Lord Jesus Christ, in whom they had come to believe through apostolic witness.<sup>5</sup>

The imperative to be witnesses supersedes the foundational directives to love and serve others since to witness of Christ is the fulfillment of love and service. When witnessing of Christ, the Christian is both obedient and worshipful. The exaltation of Jesus Christ will always result in changed lives as well as opposition for it is in the name of Jesus that lives are changed.

In *Preach the Word* Greg Haslam wrote,

The era of the Spirit had commenced, and church growth began to snowball according to Acts 4:4. The apostles preached incessantly – so much so that the main complaint voiced against them by the authorities was that they had ‘filled Jerusalem’ with their teaching. Dramatic church growth and equally dramatic hostility as a result – were not the result of inter-faith festivals, the creative arts, jumble sales or Christian rock concerts. It was through persistent preaching, day by day in the temple courts, or visiting house to house. They never ceased proclaiming the good news that Jesus is the Christ.<sup>6</sup>

What shook the first century following the ascension of Jesus was not what his followers were doing as much as what they were focused on. Simply put, they had one message and it was Jesus Christ the risen Son of the living God. Yet the church in subsequent centuries seemed to lose this focus settling on token acts that are kind but lack the stated mission of the church which is to make followers of Jesus. (Matthew 28:19)

J. Michael Walters states that “We have too commonly today a church grown adept at accommodating to and being shaped by the culture around it. Whenever the church stops keeping Jesus as the absolute central focus of its life and ministry, such accommodation is virtually inevitable. The church adopts values antithetical to the Kingdom it has been commissioned to expand.”<sup>7</sup> We will find scripture not only opposing this view but modeling a specific focus on Jesus Christ.

What follows is an examination of select passages that reveal focused and obedient followers of Jesus Christ. Comparatively speaking, observations will include how out of focus we may be in the twenty-first century.

## A First Century Model

### **Acts 2:22-32**

Men of Israel, listen to these words: Jesus the Nazarene, a man attested to you by God with miracles and wonders and signs which God performed through Him in your midst, just as you yourselves know— this Man, delivered over by the predetermined plan and foreknowledge of God, you nailed to a cross by the hands of godless men and put Him to death. But God raised Him up again, putting an end to the agony of death, since it was impossible for Him to be held in its power. For David says of Him, ‘I saw the Lord always in my presence; For He is at my right hand, so that I will not be shaken. ‘Therefore, my heart was glad, and my tongue exulted; Moreover, my flesh also will live in hope; Because You will not abandon my soul to Hades, nor allow Your Holy One to undergo decay. ‘You have made known to me the ways of life; You will make me full of gladness with Your presence.’

---

<sup>5</sup> Wright, *The Mission of God’s People*, 164.

<sup>6</sup> Greg Haslam, “Preach the Word,” in *Preach the Word: The Call and Challenge of Preaching Today*, edited by Greg Haslam (Lancaster: Sovereign World Limited, 2006), 35.

<sup>7</sup> J. Michael Walters, “The Church Jesus Builds Is Incarnational” in *The Church Jesus Builds: A Dialogue on the Church in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*. ed. Joseph Coleson (Indianapolis: Wesleyan Publishing House, 2007), 35.

Brethren, I may confidently say to you regarding the patriarch David that he both died and was buried, and his tomb is with us to this day. And so, because he was a prophet and knew that God had sworn to him with an oath to seat one of his descendants on his throne, he looked ahead and spoke of the resurrection of the Christ, that He was neither abandoned to Hades, nor did His flesh suffer decay. This Jesus God raised up again, to which we are all witnesses.

From the beginning of the church Peter was present. He experienced the coming of the Spirit in the upper room and in a powerful discourse, that a mere fisherman could not possibly present without much preparation and coaching, he presented Jesus Christ. In this passage, Peter refers to Jesus nine times. The immediate focus at the event of Pentecost was Jesus Christ.

Craig Keener states, “That Peter opens his exposition with mention of Jesus sets the tone for what will follow”.<sup>8</sup> Keener provides an outline to Peter’s discourse including, Appealing to Jesus’ Signs (2:22), Jesus’s Death and God’s Plan (2:23), Jesus as Lord in Light of Scripture (2:25-36), Jesus’ Resurrection (2:25-28), Jesus, Not David, Is the Exalted King (2:29:36).<sup>9</sup> The focus on Jesus is overt but Keener notices that Peter’s use of the title Lord is distinct.

Lord was a frequent title for pagan deities, but for the earliest Jewish followers of Jesus, it was especially a divine title in the LXX. For Luke, God the Father is Lord (Acts 2:20, 39: 3:19-20, 22; 4:25-26, 29) but Christ also receives this title by exaltation (1:21; 2:36; 4:33; 5:14, 9:1 Rom. 10:9-13; 2 Cor. 4:5; Phil. 2:9-11); Jesus receives faith (Acts 3:16) and prayer (7:59) and is the world’s judge (10:42; 17:31).<sup>10</sup>

#### **Acts 5:42**

“Every day, in the temple and from house to house, they kept right on teaching and preaching Jesus as the Christ.”

One of the marks of the infant church is that they focused not on gaining followers or adding numbers by impressing the community. Instead, they taught and preached Jesus as Christ.

More than two thousand years later, we have been tempted to lose the basic emphasis of the church which is to be drawing attention to Jesus Christ. After all, he is “the author and finisher of our faith” (Hebrews 12:2). To truly see the lost won, faith needed to be produced. Not only was and is faith necessary for salvation (John 1:12; 1 Peter 1:9; Romans 10:9), it is the one and only way to please God (Hebrews 11:6). This faith is not in the goodness of the church or the beauty of the church, but simply in who Jesus Christ is.

This verse is found after the apostles were put in prison and told not to “teach in this name” (Acts 5:28). Presumably, they were accused of speaking about Jesus Christ. After being beaten, and told not to continue to spread their teaching, Luke reports that the apostles continued to “preach Jesus Christ” (Acts 5:42).

The council that had the apostles beaten and imprisoned were “cut to the heart” (Acts 5:33). The same phrase is used by those who heard Stephen’s sermon (Acts 7:54). The center of both instances was the teaching and preaching of Jesus Christ.

Granted, the goal of the church is to win people. Missional efforts are to welcome souls into the Kingdom of God, so we hope for positive responses to the teaching and preaching of Jesus Christ. Nevertheless, focusing on Jesus Christ will divide the penitent and the rebellious. This should never be a concern for the church. Our first dedication, like the first century church, is to present Jesus Christ to a world that desperately needs his forgiveness.

Warren Wiersbe notes, “the word translated “preach” gives us our English word evangelize, and this is the first of fifteen times it is used in Acts. It simply means “to preach the Gospel, to share the Good News

---

<sup>8</sup> Craig S. Keener, *Acts: An Exegetical Commentary vol 1* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2012), 926.

<sup>9</sup> Keener, *Acts*, 924.

<sup>10</sup> Keener, 922.

of Jesus Christ.”<sup>11</sup> He adds, “it was Jesus Christ who was the center of their witness. That was the very name that the Sanhedrin had condemned! The early church did not go about arguing religion or condemning the establishment: they simply told people about Jesus Christ and urged them to trust in Him. “For we preach not ourselves, but Christ Jesus the Lord” (2 Cor. 4:5). “Ye shall be witnesses unto Me” (Acts 1:8).”<sup>12</sup>

### **Acts 8:5, 35**

“Philip went down to the city of Samaria and began proclaiming Christ to them. Then Philip opened his mouth and beginning from this Scripture he preached Jesus to him.”

Previously, we saw that largely, the Jews had rejected the teaching and preaching of Jesus Christ even resorting to threats and even violence. It is conspicuous now that Luke reports Philip proclaiming and preaching Christ to Gentiles. Like Paul, this was not a rejection of presenting the Messiah to the Jews. Philip taking the message of Christ to Samaria and to the Ethiopian eunuch confirms that Jesus Christ is to be taken to all people regardless of ethnicity.

J. B. Polhill notes that “Philip is described as preaching to them ‘the Christ’” (v. 5). The Samaritans had their own messianic viewpoint involving the Taheb. Philip undoubtedly had to lead the Samaritans to a fuller understanding of the true Messiah just as Jesus had to do with the Samaritan woman (John 4:25f.). Similarly, Peter had to set forth the unheard-of concept of a suffering Messiah to the Jewish crowds in Jerusalem (Acts 3:18). This message was power and life is found in the one Philip proclaimed (v. 6).<sup>13</sup>

The church in the twenty-first century is truly missional when it speaks of Jesus Christ to all people whether they are nominal Christians, atheists, seekers, or are practicing a religion that does not recognize Jesus Christ as the one way to the Father. True compassion for others will lead the present-day church to proclaim Jesus Christ.

Later Luke tells the reader that Philip continued to preach Christ. This time, he is telling an Ethiopian Eunuch about Jesus. Polhill summarizes this encounter as “three natural parts: the preparation (vv. 26–29), the witness (vv. 30–35), and the commitment (vv. 36–40).”<sup>14</sup> At the center of their discussion was Jesus.

### **Acts 9:20-22**

“Immediately he began to proclaim Jesus in the synagogues, saying, ‘He is the Son of God.’ All those hearing him continued to be amazed, and were saying, ‘Is this not the one who in Jerusalem destroyed those who called on this name, and had come here for the purpose of bringing them bound before the chief priests?’ But Saul kept increasing in strength and confounding the Jews who lived at Damascus by proving that this *Jesus* is the Christ.”

The man who vehemently opposed the preaching and teaching of Jesus Christ not only encountered Christ, but he was also changed into a man who preached the name even in the face of great persecution and suffering. As was previously stated, the message of Jesus did not end with the death of Stephen. God did not give up on Israel.

Not only does Saul now preach Jesus, but he does it in an exceptional way which Polhill states is noteworthy. “Luke described Paul as preaching Christ as ‘Son of God.’ This is the only occurrence of the title in all of Acts, and yet for Paul it was a central concept. In fact, Paul connected the term “Son of God” with his call as an apostle in Gal 1:16 and in Rom 1:1–4.”<sup>15</sup>

Luke not only makes mention of Saul arguing with the Jews, but he also states that he proved that Jesus is the Christ. This is of utmost importance. In our Western world, proof is necessary otherwise the message is not taken seriously. One might wonder what proof Saul presented. It is safe to say that Saul,

---

<sup>11</sup> W. W. Wiersbe, *The Bible Exposition Commentary Vol. 1*, (Wheaton: Victor Books, 1996), 427-428.

<sup>12</sup> Wiersbe, *The Bible Exposition Commentary*, 427-428.

<sup>13</sup> J. B. Polhill, *Acts, Vol. 26* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1992), 214.

<sup>14</sup> Polhill, *Acts*, 214.

<sup>15</sup> Polhill, 239.

who was adept at the Hebrew scriptures showed the Jews that Jesus of Nazareth completely fulfilled the prophecies of the promised Messiah.

Rarely in our time, will people be knowledgeable of the Old Testament and the significance of the Messianic prophecies. Nevertheless, providing the biblical meta narrative will be truly missional. Like in the case of Saul, presenting the fulfillment of prophecy, it will be the ultimate obedience for the present church, and it will certainly draw some to a living faith in Jesus Christ.

### **Acts 17:1-3**

“Now when they had traveled through Amphipolis and Apollonia, they came to Thessalonica, where there was a synagogue of the Jews. And according to Paul’s custom, he went to them, and for three Sabbaths reasoned with them from the Scriptures, explaining and giving evidence that the Christ had to suffer and rise again from the dead, and saying, ‘This Jesus whom I am proclaiming to you is the Christ.’”

Paul’s habit was to go to synagogues where he would do three things. First, he would, according to Luke, reason from Scriptures, second explain the Scripture and third give evidence of Christ’s passion, death, and resurrection. Some responded favorably to Paul proclaiming Christ. Conversely some stirred up, out of jealousy, a mob which resulted in Paul leaving quickly. What Paul did is key,

His communications consisted in the opening and setting forth of two truths to his hearers, in accordance with the Old Testament, first, that, according to the prophecies, it was necessary that the Messiah should suffer and rise again; secondly, that This One, namely Jesus, is the Anointed One. It is certainly the most simple interpretation to regard (with Luther, Bengel [and Hackett]) οὗτος as the subject, and ὁ Χριστός as the predicate, in which case Ἰησ. ὃν ἐγὼ καταγ. ὑμῖν are words that are introduced merely as explanatory of οὗτος.<sup>16</sup>

Lenski expands on this theme by stating,

After opening up the Scriptures Paul proceeded to show their fulfillment in Jesus. Here Luke drops into direct discourse: ‘that this One is the Christ (of the Scripture promises), the Jesus whom I on my part (emphatic ἐγὼ) am proclaiming to you.’ Thus the whole story of Jesus was presented in the light of the Messianic prophecies. We follow the same course to this day even for ourselves who are not of Jewish blood. What makes us so everlastingly sure is this prophecy through the ages with its fulfillment in Jesus.<sup>17</sup>

Throughout history, the news of the Savior has not always been accepted with cheer. This has not deterred the church through the centuries. The church has long been an enemy to many communities, not because it is destructive or dangerous, rather it is because there is power in proclaiming Christ which is the most powerful threat to the spirits of darkness.

### **Acts 17:18**

“And also, some of the Epicurean and Stoic philosophers were conversing with him. Some were saying, ‘What would this idle babbler wish to say?’ Others, ‘He seems to be a proclaimer of strange deities,’—because he was preaching Jesus and the resurrection.”

Luke recounts Paul’s experience in Athens specifically when he went to engage in an atmosphere where discussion and debate was celebrated. The Greek philosophers entertained many ideas proudly asserting their broadmindedness. They reasoned that Paul had nothing but little bits of truth, so they patronized him by listening but when Paul spoke of the resurrection of Jesus, some mocked.

Expounding on the cultural environment that Paul encountered, Wiersbe wrote, the Greek religion was a mere deification of human attributes and the powers of nature,” wrote Conybeare and Howson in their classic *Life and Epistles of St. Paul*. “It was a religion which ministered to art and amusement and was entirely destitute of moral power” (pp. 280–281). The

<sup>16</sup> J. P. Lange, et al., *A Commentary on the Holy Scriptures: Acts* (Bellingham: Logos, 2008), 316.

<sup>17</sup> R. C. H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of the Acts of the Apostles* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1961), 693.

Greek myths spoke of gods and goddesses that, in their own rivalries and ambitions, acted more like humans than gods; and there were plenty of deities to choose from! One wit jested that in Athens it was easier to find a god than a man. Paul saw that the city was “wholly given to idolatry.”<sup>18</sup>

The 21<sup>st</sup> century is not unlike what Paul experienced in Athens. Like Paul’s experience, some today will mock the preaching of Jesus and the resurrection. This is of no consequence to believers. Like Paul, we are “tellers” of the truth of who Jesus Christ is.

Wiersbe observes that Paul spoke of “The greatness of God: He is Creator (v. 24), The goodness of God; He is Provider (v. 25), The government of God: He is Ruler (vv. 26–29), The grace of God: He is Savior (vv. 30–34).”<sup>19</sup>

### **Acts 18:4-6**

“Paul was reasoning in the synagogue every Sabbath and trying to persuade Jews and Greeks. But when Silas and Timothy came down from Macedonia, Paul began devoting himself completely to the word, solemnly testifying to the Jews that Jesus was the Christ. But when they resisted and blasphemed, he shook out his garments and said to them, ‘Your blood be on your own heads. I am clean.’”

As was stated earlier, Paul’s habit was to frequent synagogues in numerous locations not only because he was a rabbi<sup>20</sup> but also now more so since he had a special message. There he would “testify to the Jews that Jesus was the Christ” (Acts 18:5). Again, the response to Paul was anything but positive. Not only did the Jews oppose him they blasphemed, more than likely the subject of Paul’s talk, Jesus Christ.

Lenski notes that Paul, being a responsible Jew who learned a trade eventually began to hold himself to the Word” (“spirit” in the A. V. is incorrect), inchoative imperfect of the direct middle (R. 808, also W. P., not passive as our versions translate). He began to devote all his time to the Word, applying himself especially to testifying earnestly to the Jews that Jesus is the Messiah. His earnings during the past few weeks enabled him to do this. The Jews were Paul’s special concern; and the issue was whether they would accept Jesus as “the Christ,” the Messiah.<sup>21</sup>

If we were looking to win people by any other means, we would do all we could to impress and draw the outsider into our fellowship but preaching Christ does not result in all accepting the message the church has been given. We are not deterred by this, and neither was Paul. He responded to the rejection of the Jews with rejection. He moved on to the Gentiles with the gospel of Jesus Christ. This does not mean that Paul gave up on the Jews as is borne out by his message to the Roman church. “Brothers and sisters, my heart’s desire and my prayer to God for them is for their salvation. For I testify about them that they have a zeal for God, but not in accordance with knowledge. For not knowing about God’s righteousness and seeking to establish their own, they did not subject themselves to the righteousness of God. For Christ is the end of the Law for righteousness to everyone who believes” (Romans 10:1-4).

### **Acts 18:28**

“When he wanted to go across to Achaia, the brothers encouraged him and wrote to the disciples to welcome him; and when he had arrived, he greatly helped those who had believed through grace, for he powerfully refuted the Jews in public, demonstrating by the Scriptures that Jesus was the Christ.”

Apollos, a Jew that was “mighty in Scriptures” (Acts 18:24) refuted the Jews and was able to demonstrate from the Scriptures that Jesus is the Christ. The focus of the first century Christian was to show others who Jesus Christ was. Followers of Jesus were more concerned with bringing him to the

---

<sup>18</sup> Wiersbe, 472.

<sup>19</sup> Wiersbe, 474.

<sup>20</sup> There is some dispute as to whether Saul of Tarsus was a rabbi but there many who believe that he was since he was often found teaching in synagogues. To prove one way or another is difficult, but we hold to his functioning as a rabbi since he had studied the Hebrew scriptures with Gamaliel the elder.

<sup>21</sup> Lenski, *The Interpretation of the Acts of the Apostles*, 748.



forefront of discussion since he is the promised Savior of the world. Although Apollos was not an apostle, he too fulfilled the commission to proclaim Christ.

Wiersbe states that “the only problem was that this enthusiastic man was declaring an incomplete Gospel. His message got as far as John the Baptist and then stopped! He knew nothing about Calvary, the resurrection of Christ, or the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. He had zeal, but he lacked spiritual knowledge (Rom. 10:1–4).”<sup>22</sup> He was then instructed by Priscilla and Aquila “the way of God more accurately” (Acts 18:26). Undoubtedly, they showed him about Jesus Christ fulfilling the scripture resulting in him “demonstrating by the Scriptures that Jesus was the Christ” (Acts 18:28).

### **Acts 26:22-23**

“So, having obtained help from God, I stand to this day testifying both to small and great, stating nothing but what the Prophets and Moses said was going to take place; that the Christ was to suffer, *and* that by reason of *His* resurrection from the dead He would be the first to proclaim light both to the *Jewish* people and to the Gentiles.”

Paul stood before King Agrippa and proclaimed the truth of Jesus Christ. Again, pointing to not only the mandate to reveal Christ to all. Paul did not try to leverage others influence. Rather, Paul saw Agrippa and all that heard him as humans who needed salvation through Christ. After hearing Paul, the king stated that he was close to being convinced to become a Christ follower. Presenting Jesus Christ to anyone that will listen has been proven to be a powerful missional tool no matter how influential they are.

Wiersbe states that Paul’s life and ministry is “witnessing (see Acts 26:16). He simply shared with others what he had learned and experienced as a follower of Jesus Christ. His message was not something he manufactured, for it was based solidly on the Old Testament Scriptures. We must remind ourselves that Paul and the other apostles did not have the New Testament but used the Old Testament to lead sinners to Christ and to nurture the new believers”.<sup>23</sup>

### **1 Corinthians 1:22-23**

“Jews ask for signs and Greeks search for wisdom; but we preach Christ crucified, to Jews a stumbling block and to Gentiles foolishness.”

Regardless of what the populace is searching for, Paul wrote that “we preach Christ” (1 Cor. 1:22). We are wise to adhere to Paul’s statement. The world may be looking for an impressive church that does and says what is desired, but that is not what drives the church of Jesus Christ. The East prides itself on the ideology of signs or proofs and the west bases its positions on wisdom. These are not necessarily evil, but they miss the eternal significance of the second person of the Trinity coming to redeem a fallen world. Paul challenged both with the simple message of the crucifixion of Jesus Christ.

Leon Morris concludes that the Greek practice of “speculative philosophy” that sought wisdom “often degenerated into meaningless sophistries (*cf* Acts 17:21). In contrast with this (but, *de*, is adversative, and *we*, *hemis*, is emphatic), Paul sets the preaching of Christ crucified. The verb *preach* (*kerysso*) is that appropriate to the action of a herald.”<sup>24</sup>

### **2 Corinthians 4:4-5**

“The god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelieving so that they might not see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God. For we do not preach ourselves but Christ Jesus as Lord and ourselves as your bond servants for Jesus’ sake.”

The greatest temptation the church faces is to promote self over Jesus Christ. The apostle Paul reminded the Corinthian church that Satan deviously blinds people. This is not a physical blindness, but a

---

<sup>22</sup> Wiersbe, 480.

<sup>23</sup> Wiersbe, 480.

<sup>24</sup> Leon Morris, *Tyndale New Testament Commentaries Revised Edition* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1987), 45-46.

perceptive blindness. This is especially horrible when it is the glory of Jesus Christ, the image of God that cannot be seen.

Responding to this passage, D. E. Garland raises the propensity to lose sight of the focus of preaching even in the 1<sup>st</sup> century.

The temptation to preach ourselves is fed by congregations who are “prone to like to be entertained and to enjoy a minister’s self-exhibition” and are prone “to indulge in a personality cult.” Clearly, Corinth was such a congregation, rallying around and exaggerating the importance of their ministerial heroes (1 Cor 1:12) and using their worship to show off their own individual gifts (1 Cor 14:26). They may have encouraged Paul’s rivals in their boasting and berated him for his failure to display more dramatically his apostolic prowess.<sup>25</sup>

The Greek word *doxa* is translated glory. When walking outside on a sunny day, the glory (*doxa*) of the sun is so great that we cannot look at the sun. Jesus Christ is the brilliance of God so to preach and focus on anything else is a mistake.

Garland goes further when he states, “Christless preaching quickly degenerates into vapid moralism. Paul has already argued that no transformation can occur except through Christ (3:18).”<sup>26</sup> The argument of this paper is that preaching anything other than Jesus Christ misses the opportunity for transformation. Garland does not commit a hyperbole if one only sees the unmistakable glory of God in Jesus Christ.

### ***Colossians 1:25-28***

“I was made a minister according to the stewardship from God bestowed on me for your benefit, so that I might fully carry out the preaching of the word of God, that is, the mystery which has been hidden from the past ages and generations, but has now been manifested to His saints, to whom God willed to make known what is the riches of the glory of this mystery among the Gentiles, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory. We proclaim Him.”

In this letter, Paul gives a thorough description of Jesus Christ (vv. 15-20) then he announces that “We proclaim Him” (1:28). The New American Standard Bible records Paul using the word Christ twenty-nine times in ninety-five verses. Obviously, the focus of both the letter and of Paul is Jesus Christ. Paul does not demand that Christ be preached or proclaimed but he does emphasize what they did in the first century. Undoubtedly, the theme of Colossians is Christ Jesus. To focus on any other topic would be a dreadful error.

N. T. Wright, in his study of Colossians sets a directive when he states, “Him we proclaim: these words serve, for Christian preachers and teachers, as a constant reminder of their central calling, not (first and foremost) to comment on current affairs or to alleviate human problems, good and necessary as those activities may be, but to announce that Jesus is Lord.”<sup>27</sup>

The church of Colossi grappled with Gnosticism which would tarnish the second person of the Trinity, so Paul wrote in no uncertain terms that proclaiming Christ Jesus was for the expressed purpose of presenting “every man complete in Christ” (1:28). The importance of this cannot be minimized. Neither can proclaiming anything else be maximized.

## **Current Church Trends**

The church planting movement is evidence that Christian leaders see the need to be obedient to the great commission. One such movement is Acts 29 that is self-described as “a diverse, global community of healthy, multiplying churches characterized by theological clarity, cultural engagement, and missional

---

<sup>25</sup> D. E. Garland, *2 Corinthians Vol. 29* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1999), 214.

<sup>26</sup> Garland, *2 Corinthians*, 215.

<sup>27</sup> N. T. Wright, *Colossians and Philemon: An Introduction and Commentary* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1986), 93.

innovation.”<sup>28</sup> Foundational assumptions are well-articulated but curiously do not include any mention of the person of Jesus Christ. Christians and the Church are referenced but it lacks focus as was found in the above scriptural references. This is not a criticism of this movement’s beliefs. Neither can we assume any sinister motive, rather it simply points out that Christ is not a passion at the forefront of their initial presentation.

Don Fanning asks, “How was it that the Early Church spread so rapidly throughout the hostile Roman Empire in the first century of its existence?”<sup>29</sup> His answer is that, “It was not just evangelism of winning individuals to Christ but rather the bonding of every individual believer into local groups that committed themselves to follow Jesus’ commands and share their newfound freedom of forgiveness and acceptance through Jesus Christ.”<sup>30</sup> Fanning goes on to present the Church Planting Movement (CPM) as not only an effective movement but also a vital movement designed to obediently fulfill the great commission as the first century church did.

Fanny does provide the “how to” which includes the following common characteristics of the CPM. “1. Worship in the heart language; 2. Evangelism has communal implications; 3. Rapid incorporation of new converts into the life and ministry of the church; 4. Passion and fearlessness due to a sense of urgency of the importance of salvation and conversion.; 5. A price to pay to become a Christian; 6. Perceived leadership crisis or spiritual vacuum in society; 7. On-the-job training for church leadership; 8. Leadership authority is decentralized for ease of decision-making in a dynamic movement; 9. Outsiders keep a low profile; 10. Missionaries suffer persecution.”<sup>31</sup> Additional distinctives observed are “Prayer, Scripture, Family, Disciple Making and Teaching Obedience.”<sup>32</sup> There can be no arguments with a community experiencing these but there seems to be something missing; Jesus Christ.

In an attempt to reconcile evangelical intent and social concern in one particular denomination, Jason Davies-Kildea states,

The Salvation Army is one of the best-known community organizations in Australia and is highly respected for its service to those in need – at the frontlines of natural disasters, housing the homeless and lending a helping hand to struggling families. What is less well known to those outside the movement is that The Salvation Army is a Christian church. Once the driving force of an evangelical movement dedicated to social change, the organization’s religious roots are increasingly becoming a fact of history and less a noticeable presence within the community.”<sup>33</sup>

The founder of the Salvation Army, William Booth (1829-1912), stated

We believe in the old-fashioned salvation. We have not developed and improved into Universalism, Unitarianism, or Nothingarianism, or any other form of infidelity, and we don't expect to. Ours is just the same salvation taught in the Bible, proclaimed by Prophets and Apostles, preached by Luther and Wesley and Whitefield, sealed by the blood of martyrs--the very same salvation which was purchased by the sufferings and agony and Blood of the Son of God. We believe the world needs it; this and this alone will set the world right. We want no other nostrum-- nothing new. We are on the track of the old Apostles. You don't need to mix up any other ingredients with the heavenly remedy.<sup>34</sup>

---

<sup>28</sup> “Acts 29,” Accessed April 3, 2022. <https://www.acts29.com/about-us/>

<sup>29</sup> Don Fanning, "Church Planting Movements" (2009). *Trends and Issues in Missions*. 6. [https://digitalcommons.liberty.edu/cgm\\_missions/6,1](https://digitalcommons.liberty.edu/cgm_missions/6,1).

<sup>30</sup> Fanning, 1.

<sup>31</sup> Fanning, 8-9.

<sup>32</sup> Fanning, 9.

<sup>33</sup> J. M. H. Davies-Kildea, “The Salvation Army and the Social Gospel: Reconciling Evangelical Intent and Social Concern,” PhD Thesis, Monash University (2017), 3.

<sup>34</sup> Harold Begbie, *The Life of General William Booth* (New York: Macmillan, 1920), 406.

It should be noted that the Salvation Army is not the only denomination that has emphasized “doing” more than “knowing” but they are a prime example of a denomination that has lost a part of their initial focus on Jesus Christ.

Glen Packiam, writing for the Barna Group, regarding the central message of denominations, states, We discovered that the split in priorities falls along broad denominational lines. When asked to rank a list of missional priorities, U.S. pastors list church priorities in this order: Sharing the gospel with non-Christians locally (72%), local poverty (58%) and caring for the elderly and widows (53%). But a closer analysis reveals a deeper divide. Over four in five mainline church pastors (86%) rank local poverty most highly as their church’s missional priority compared to half of non-mainline church pastors (48%). Meanwhile, sharing the gospel with non-Christians locally was the top priority for 83 percent of non-mainline pastors compared to 37 percent of mainline pastors. Given this data, what possible path forward exists for the Church? Our starting point has to be Jesus. The mission of Jesus is how the mission of God took on flesh. And the mission of God is to put his world back together, to return shalom to the cosmos—a world made whole, a world that is flourishing and filled with the glory of God.<sup>35</sup>

It is common to read sermon titles on social media prior to any given Sunday. In most cases, they have followed the pattern set by Rick Warren to preach sermons that while are helpful to deal with the challenges of life, are not preaching Jesus Christ as was the habit of the 1<sup>st</sup> century churches. Assessing Warren’s preferred manner of preaching, Kenton C. Anderson states that it is pragmatic preaching which is a “need-solution focus.”<sup>36</sup> “The pragmatic sermon is all about life application.”<sup>37</sup> This seems to be a healthy focus for sermons after all, the desire for changed lives is the bottom line except the bottom line may put the cart before the horse. Should Jesus be preached or is it unnecessary if the bottom line is changed lives? The danger is to forget Jesus Christ.

The acclaimed preacher, Haddon Robinson said that “more heresy gets preached in application than in any other aspect of the sermon”<sup>38</sup> which should give us pause to reflect on the need for focus on the person of Jesus Christ rather than on the perceived needs of this common preaching practice.

Modern preaching may gravitate to a “needs-solution focus” but without the context that the 1<sup>st</sup> century church had, which was to preach the “who,” sermons run the risk of losing representing and experiencing the presence of God. John Piper, in his book “The Supremacy of God in Preaching, reminds preachers that their task is to represent God and his glory by means of the sermon.”<sup>39</sup>

Scott Gibson, speaking of the post-modern church declares that sermons have become antidotes to bruised egos, lists of how-toes, and topical discussions on any number of themes-but not biblically centered expositions of what the Bible said to the people and culture to which it was written and what it says to men and women today. Sermons move away from the text and launch into topical lists of how to be a better Christian or how to raise a decent family or how to develop good relationship. Certainly, one would not argue against any of these topics as virtuous for the Christian. However, when pastors or any other teachers do this, they face the problem of using the Bible as a prop.”<sup>40</sup>

British scholar, John Stott, wrote: “if the word revelation emphasizes God’s initiative in making himself known and inspiration denotes the process he employed, then authority indicates the result.

---

<sup>35</sup> Glenn Packiam, “What Is the Mission of the Church?,” *Barna Group Guest Column*, <https://www.barna.com/church-mission/>

<sup>36</sup> Kenton C. Anderson, *Choosing to Preach: A Comprehensive Introduction to Sermon Options and Structures* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2006), 161.

<sup>37</sup> Anderson, *Choosing to Preach*, 167.

<sup>38</sup> Anderson, 168.

<sup>39</sup> Anderson, 102.

<sup>40</sup> Scott Gibson, et. al., *Preaching to A Shifting Culture Twelve Perspectives On Communicating that Connects* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2004), 220.

Because Scripture is the revelation of God by the inspiration of the Spirit, it has authority over us.”<sup>41</sup> To be diverted to any other topic for preaching not only deviates from the 1<sup>st</sup> century church practice, but it also minimizes the effectiveness of preaching. Carefully, attending to preaching and teaching who God is in the person of Jesus Christ is being true to God’s revelatory mission. The 1<sup>st</sup> century church did not seem to be concerned with the results of preaching Christ. These New Testament believers zealously shared what was burning within their hearts. The clarion call for those who preach in the 21<sup>st</sup> century is to encounter the living Christ and be so inclined to present him to this godless world.

### Conclusion

Michael Eaton observes, “Most of the time in our preaching we talk about people’s problems and issues. We need to preach about God, as Paul did: the God of the Bible, the Holy God, the Righteous God, the Pure God, the Sin-hating God. We don’t need to argue for God; we need to declare Him.”<sup>42</sup>

If we are to take the words of the apostle Paul as crucial to the argument that the focus of the early church was Jesus Christ, this passage must be considered. “How can they call on him to save them unless they believe in him? And how can they believe in him if they have never heard about him? And how can they hear about him unless someone tells them” (Romans 10:14)? Peter adds, “There is salvation in no one else; for there is no other name under heaven that has been given among mankind by which we must be saved” (Acts 4:12).

Donavon W. Shoemaker rightly summarizes the mission given to the church by its Lord. “Jesus’ plan is that people will recognize Him through their interfacing with His Church. In other words, we show ourselves to be His disciples because we are His disciples. Our doing comes from our being.”<sup>43</sup> Shoemaker could go further by stating that when the church speaks of Jesus, it is truly showing that they are his people. To preach, teach, and speak of anything but Jesus Christ, who is the only hope for the world, is most definitely missing the mark. It is deviating from the focus of the early church and is not compassionate towards those in overwhelming eternal need. Additionally, if our energies are given to surface efforts to the exclusion of drawing attention to who God is, our time is largely wasted.

While our present day affords many blessings that were not present in the first century including a measure of freedom to preach Jesus Christ unabated -in the western context- as well as the numerous physical assets such as technological advancements, we lose meaning if the centrality of our message is not Jesus Christ.

The early church including the apostles gladly suffered much. They had an overwhelming love for their Master, so they focused on him. Should we do less, it may indicate that the present church desperately needs a first century encounter with Jesus Christ.

---

<sup>41</sup> Gibson, 223.

<sup>42</sup> Michael Eaton, et. al., *Preach the Word: The Call and Challenge of Preaching Today* (Lancaster: Sovereign World Limited, 2006), 109.

<sup>43</sup> Donavon W. Shoemaker, *Building Bridges in The Church Jesus Builds: A Dialogue on the Church in the 21st Century*, ed. Joseph Coleson (Indianapolis: Wesleyan, 2007), 180.

## Bibliography

- “Acts 29.” Accessed April 3, 2022. <https://www.acts29.com/about-us/>
- Anderson, Kenton C., *Choosing to Preach: A Comprehensive Introduction to Sermon Options and Structures*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2006.
- Begbie, Harold, *The Life of General William Booth*. New York: Macmillan, 1920.
- Davies-Kildea, J. M. H. “The Salvation Army and the Social Gospel: Reconciling Evangelical Intent and Social Concern,” PhD Thesis, Monash University, 2017.
- Eaton, Michael. “God-Centred Preaching.” *Preach the Word: The Call and Challenge of Preaching Today*. ed. Greg Haslam. Lancaster: Sovereign World Limited, 2006.
- Fanning, Don, “Church Planting Movements” (2009). *Trends and Issues in Missions*. 6. [https://digitalcommons.liberty.edu/cgm\\_missions/6](https://digitalcommons.liberty.edu/cgm_missions/6)
- Garland, D. E., *2 Corinthians Vol. 29*. Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1999.
- Gibson, Scott, et. al., *Preaching to A Shifting Culture: Twelve Perspectives On Communicating That Connects*. Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2004.
- Haslam, Greg. “Preach the Word.” In *Preach the Word: The Call and Challenge of Preaching Today*, ed. Greg Haslam. Lancaster: Sovereign World Limited, 2006.
- Keener, Craig S., *Acts an Exegetical Commentary vol 1*. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2012.
- Lange, J. P., et al. *A Commentary on the Holy Scriptures: Acts*. Bellingham: Logos, 2008.
- Lenski, R. C. H., *The Interpretation of the Acts of the Apostles*. Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1961.
- Morris, Leon, *Tyndale New Testament Commentaries Revised Edition*. Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1987.
- Packiam, Glenn. “What Is the Mission of the Church?” *Barna Group Guest Column*, <https://www.barna.com/church-mission/>
- Polhill, J. B., *Acts, Vol. 26*. Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1992.
- Shoemaker, Donavon W. “Building Bridges.” *The Church Jesus Builds: A Dialogue on the Church in the 21st Century*. Editor, Joseph Coleson. Indianapolis: Wesleyan, 2007.
- Stott, John R.W. *The Art of Preaching in the Twentieth Century*. Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1994.
- Walters, Michael J. “The Church Jesus Builds Is Incarnational.” In *The Church Jesus Builds: A Dialogue on the Church in the 21st Century*, ed. Joseph Coleson. Indianapolis: Wesleyan, 2007.
- Wiersbe, *The Bible Exposition Commentary, Vol. 1*. Wheaton: Victor Books, 1996.
- Wright, Christopher J. H. *The Mission of God’s People: A Biblical Theology of the Church’s Mission*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010.
- Wright, N. T., *Colossians and Philemon: An Introduction and Commentary*. Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1986.

# *The Story of Indigenous Ministry in Alberta:* *A study on the relationship between the evangelical church* *and the first peoples of Canada*



Cayla Thorlakson, Vanguard College alumni and staff.<sup>1</sup>

---

**ABSTRACT:** *This essay provides a brief summary of a project on the history of the actions and changing philosophies of the evangelical church in their relationship with Indigenous peoples in Alberta. An overview of the original project's research design is provided, followed by three main sections. First is a broad historical overview of the relationship between the evangelical Church and Indigenous people, beginning with the first contact by European settlers in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. This is followed by a short section on changing philosophies of missions work with Indigenous peoples within the Euro-Canadian church. Finally, a summary of the main philosophical and cultural debates currently and historically taking place within the context of Indigenous ministry is included. The purpose of these discussions is to equip readers, particularly Christians, with a better understanding of the complicated context of the Church's ministry actions towards Indigenous people in Alberta.*<sup>2</sup>

**KEYWORDS:** *Indigenous ministry, Indigenous peoples, Indigenous Christians, Indigenous church, First Nations, First Nations ministry, Evangelism, Church history, Evangelical history, Alberta history, Truth and Reconciliation Commission, Contextualization*

---

The relationship between the Church and Indigenous peoples in what we now call Canada has a long and storied history. At one point in the late 20th century, Canadian evangelical Christians were passionate about sharing the Gospel with their Indigenous neighbours. However, in the era of social justice, post-Christianity, contextualization, and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, ministry is more complicated than it once seemed. Christians find themselves second guessing age-old philosophies and models of ministry that once seemed sure, and, in the face of passionate voices that critique and challenge the Church from inside and out, find themselves uncertain how to proceed.

In 2020, Vanguard College Library began a project to create a digital heritage collection on the topic of Indigenous ministry. With further funding, this heritage project evolved into a full qualitative research study that aimed to answer the question, "What is the story of Indigenous ministry in Alberta?" The project is available in full online, but a version has been converted into an article here, summarizing some of the findings from the study. To read the whole story and view databases with ministry contacts, practical resources, and research information, visit <https://www.thesimaproject.ca/>

This essay provides a brief summary on the history of the actions and changing philosophies of the evangelical church in their relationship with Indigenous peoples in Alberta. An overview of the original project's research design is provided, followed by three main sections. First is a broad historical overview of the relationship between the evangelical Church and Indigenous people, beginning with the first

---

<sup>1</sup> Cayla graduated from Vanguard College in 2020 with a degree in Pastoral Care and Counselling. Cayla loves hearing people's stories, and is passionate about healing and bridge building. She currently works as a library assistant and is working towards becoming a counsellor.

<sup>2</sup> Note: This article has been adapted from a larger work by the same author previously published on [www.thesimaproject.ca/](http://www.thesimaproject.ca/). Minor adjustments have been made to suit the article better for shorter length. The full context of the study is available to read on the project site



contact by European settlers in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. This is followed by a short section on changing philosophies of missions work with Indigenous peoples within the Euro-Canadian church. Finally, a summary of the main philosophical and cultural debates currently and historically taking place within the context of Indigenous ministry is included. The purpose of these discussions is to equip readers, particularly Christians, with a better understanding of the complicated context of the Church's ministry actions towards Indigenous people in Alberta.

### **Research Design Overview<sup>3</sup>**

The purpose of the "The Story of Indigenous Ministry in Alberta (SIMA) Project" was to create a thorough and foundational knowledge repository that enables users to understand and connect with SIMA. The research methodology is qualitative research, using narrative analysis, and involves the collection of stories, documents, and other records of personal experience to help construct an understanding of SIMA both past and present. Data collection methods include 1) semi-structured interviews using snowball sampling (18 in total), 2) literature survey of websites, books, articles, and archives, and 3) document collection of digital resources and objects. The scope of the project includes para-church ministries intended for Indigenous individuals in Alberta within the evangelical Protestant tradition, and loosely limited to the last 100 years while prioritizing historical information connected to currently operating ministries.

Project partnerships/funding includes Vanguard College Library, Family and Community Twining Society (FACTS), Young Canada Works in Heritage Organizations, and Canada Summer Jobs. This project is jointly owned by Vanguard College and FACTS. Funding for the project came from the government of Canada, primarily through Young Canada Works in Heritage Organizations.

Information gleaned from literature and other historical sources has been cited appropriately. However, a large portion of the information included in this essay was generated directly from research interviews. This information is not cited, in line with APA citation guidelines which state that original research findings within a study should not be cited as it is assumed the knowledge was generated by the research methods. Instead, anonymity of research participants has been protected, except when the participant provided explicit permission to be cited by name. In some cases, examples have been constructed from multiple accounts.

An unfortunately common mistake made in historical research is for members of the dominant social group to tell the history of other minority groups, instead of letting individuals from these groups speak for themselves. This project has made every effort to include Indigenous perspectives, but it has intentionally limited its scope to only the history of the Euro-Canadian evangelical church in order to avoid telling the stories of others. As a result, only the history, philosophy, and culture of the Euro-Canadian evangelical church, insofar as it interacts with the Indigenous church, is included in this article. For more resources on Indigenous Christian culture and history, see the SIMA Project annotated bibliography here: <https://www.thesimaproject.ca/collections/books>

### **A Historical Overview of Indigenous Ministry in Alberta**

Due to Alberta's far distance from the first European settlements in the East and the South, it was one of the last areas to be reached by European explorers, with first contact occurring in 1754 (Berry & Brink, 2004, p. 26). In the early period of contact, the settlers had a commercial relationship with the First Nations, and they saw Indigenous peoples as potential allies or trading partners (Government of Canada, 2017, Part 3). However, once the settler population grew enough to outnumber the Indigenous peoples and began demanding more land, the settlers' regard of the Indigenous peoples began to change (Government of Canada, 2017, Part 3). The settlers viewed the First Nations people as dependants, and as inferior to the more "civilized" and Christian European society (Government of Canada, 2017, Part 4). They eventually

---

<sup>3</sup> A more detailed project methodology can be found at <https://www.thesimaproject.ca/about/research-methodology>



made this attitude into policy and began a program of assimilation that would be the central tenet of Indian legislation for the next 150 years (Government of Canada, 2017, Part 4).

Unfortunately, the church was a driving force in this assimilation program as they desired to see the First Nations people assimilated into their Christian Kingdom (Government of Canada, 2017, Part 4). The first Christian missionaries arrived in Alberta in the 1840s (Palmer, 1990, p. 3), and ministry by the Anglican, Presbyterian, Methodist, and Catholic missionaries began. In keeping with the attitudes of the time, the main mission activity was the residential school program, which sought to assimilate Indigenous children into European society. In the late 1800s, Treaties 6, 7, and 8, comprising most of the territory of Alberta, were signed between the First Nations and the Crown. Around the same time, the buffalo died out, and the Plains First Nations were left disenfranchised of their livelihood. According to Ray Aldred, a leader in the Indigenous church, efforts at forced assimilation began to increase in the early 1900s when the residential school system came into full swing. By the end of the century, the abuses of the residential school system, the forced assimilation at the hands of the church, and other adversity the First Nations were experiencing, led to Indigenous Christians who had come to faith in the 1800s stepping away from the church.

In the early 1900s, while the mainline Protestant denominations continued on with their work in the Residential schools, a new player entered the field: evangelicalism. These denominations arrived too late to participate in running the Residential schools, so their ministry took a different form, primarily that of missionary sending organizations. In fact, the height of Indigenous ministry operations in the evangelical church seems to have taken place between 1950 and 1990 through these missionary organizations. During this period, Euro-Canadian evangelical Christians “had a heart for the Indians,” seeing them as a needy people group who needed to be saved. The goal of these organizations was to plant and establish European-style churches, and they often viewed Indigenous culture as demonic, something that Indigenous people needed to be delivered out of.

After the second world war, the Canadian government began reevaluating their residential school system. In 1946, a special parliamentary committee first examined the impacts of the government’s policies of assimilation and their negative effects on First Nations people (Government of Canada, 2017, Part 5). Although changes were slow coming, the government of Canada began changing their Indian legislation throughout the latter half of the century, including changes to the educational system that saw the residential schools shut down by the end of the century (Government of Canada, 2017, Part 6). In the early 2000s, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) was launched, which investigated the impacts of the Residential School system, and proposed a way forward of reconciliation between the Indigenous peoples of Canada and the groups that had oppressed them, including both the government and the church. In addition, in the ’80s and ’90s Indigenous Christians began questioning the prevailing assumption that adopting Christian faith required Indigenous believers to reject their own culture, which was understood to be inherently demonic, and to fit into Euro-Canadian culture, which was understood to be inherently righteous (Leblanc & Leblanc, 2011, p. 88). This led to the development of the modern day “contextualization movement,” which pushes churches to foster culturally Indigenous expressions of Christianity, and to commit to the decolonization of Christianity.

As the Catholic church and the mainline Protestant denominations were the ones specifically addressed by the TRC, they are the denominations that have most actively participated in the TRC’s Calls to Action. As a result, their methods and philosophies of ministry have changed from that of the 1800s and 1900s. Now, most of these denominations have specialized initiatives meant to foster reconciliation and empower Indigenous peoples to fully participate in the church as equals.

Because they were not involved in running the residential schools and were not party to the Residential Schools Settlement Agreement, the evangelical denominations largely have not been active participants with the Calls to Action. However, their methods and approaches to ministry are changing as well, influenced by the ripples the TRC has created in society. Although evangelical denominations experienced a height of Indigenous ministry in the late 1900s, this fervour waned as the century came to a close. In the last 50 years, we have seen an encouraging number of evangelical ministry organizations and initiatives led by Indigenous people themselves, in tandem with the growth of the contextualization

movement. Unfortunately, the issue of contextualization and the task of responding to the TRC are highly controversial in evangelical circles, and have led to hesitancy and disunity within the Euro-Canadian evangelical Indigenous ministry community.

Increasingly, “Indigenous ministry” is becoming something not done “to” Indigenous peoples, but “by” Indigenous peoples. Indigenous church leader Ray Aldred explains that in the early 1900s, oppression and efforts at forced assimilation increased and led to Indigenous Christians stepping away from the traditional Euro-Canadian church. However, he continues that in the ’70s, Indigenous Christians themselves then began founding churches and leading their own Christian communities. According to Aldred, “this Indigenous-led ministry had always been in the background, but now it came into the foreground.” With the realization of the contextualism movement in the ’80s and its current flourishing today, it is increasingly being seen that Indigenous peoples are able, willing, and eager to make their Christian faith their own through an expression that is distinct—though not entirely unattached—from that of the Euro-Canadian church.

As this understanding comes more into acceptance, the evangelical Indigenous ministries that still remain find themselves reevaluating their models of ministry, and moving towards an understanding that emphasizes the value of Indigenous perspectives and Indigenous leadership. With this comes a contentious debate that revolves around the issues of contextualization, syncretism, and the decolonization of Christianity. However, more than ever, this debate and other conversations in Indigenous ministry are being led by Indigenous people themselves, as equal brothers and sisters in Christ who have valuable contributions to make to the body of ministry being offered by the church.

### **A Changing Philosophy**

In Alberta, most of the evangelical church’s involvement in Indigenous ministry has been conducted within the context of missionary para-church organizations. These organizations were most active between 1950 and 1990, but a few still operate today. The purpose of these organizations was to equip Christians, mainly from the Euro-Canadian church, to travel to remote Indigenous communities and share the gospel. They usually accomplished this by establishing European-style churches, which were often not adopted or continued by the local communities after the original missionaries left the area. The methods of these organizations are criticized today by Indigenous Christians, who argue that they were based on getting Indigenous communities to adopt Western models of religion and culture, and were not appropriate or effective models of ministry. However, staff involved in these organizations point out that the current presence of Christianity among Indigenous peoples, with whom the gospel had not been available to before contact with Christians, must be attributed in some way to the work of missionaries and missionary organizations.

A change is taking place in missions-based Indigenous ministry. In the past, Indigenous ministry was largely built upon a philosophy of doing ministry to “save” Indigenous peoples by planting Western-style churches. However, today many of the still-operating missionary organizations interviewed communicated that they were beginning to question these philosophies. This reflectiveness coincides, not coincidentally, with the age of the TRC, which has asked the church to engage in reconciliation. As the Euro-Canadian church has slowly begun the process of reflection on mistakes made and harms inflicted in the past, it is also trading out the institutions that defined its ministry models. Appearing in their place are organizations like NAIITS (formerly the North American Institute for Indigenous Theological Studies), which represent the new model of Indigenous ministry wherein Indigenous people lead their own ministry and articulate their own, unique expression of Christian faith. Indeed, the very people reached by the older model of Indigenous ministry, flawed as it was, are the ones now reforming and breathing life into the field.

This transition has been far from simple or smooth, especially due to the fact that the process of addressing past mistakes and reevaluating forms of ministry is closely tied to controversial contemporary issues. For instance, institutions such as NAIITS have been criticized by certain sectors for going too far in their efforts to establish Christian faith within the Indigenous context, straying into compromise or even

syncretism. Although many research participants articulated an attitude of reevaluation regarding issues like contextualization, many others did not. Instead, other participants articulated a concern that the contextualization movement and similar thinking was leading churches astray. Furthermore, Indigenous, Euro-Canadian, and other non-Indigenous individuals and institutions can be found on both sides of the debate; there are no clear ethnic or denominational lines of division drawn in the sand (although there are trends). Although virtually all involved Christian parties realize the need to address the call for change and applicable contemporary issues, they have yet to agree in any unified sense on a way forward.

## Contemporary Issues

In addition to historical narratives, understanding contemporary issues within the world of Indigenous ministry will help yield a clearer picture of the past and the present. Two main issues constantly remain at the forefront of any discussion on Christianity and Indigenous peoples: The contextualization of Indigenous Christianity, and the task of responding to the TRC. Regardless of one's opinions on these issues, understanding them is important to understanding the past, present, and future story of Indigenous ministry, as such themes form the path of the narrative.

### *The Discussion of Contextualization*

In any arena where Indigenous people interact with Christianity, a basic question arises: Can and should Indigenous culture be brought into or provide the basis of Indigenous expressions of the Christian faith? The discussion often ends up being phrased in terms of whether elements of Indigenous culture/spirituality, such as smudging and drums, can be used in Christian worship.

#### *Pro-Contextualization*

Those who are pro-contextualization argue that contextualization is a basic part of missions work. They would point out that, in any other country, contextualization of the local/Indigenous culture into Christian worship is a common and accepted practice. For instance, drums are commonly used in worship services in countries outside of the West, as wide ranging as Colombia (Priest, 2007, p. 120), South Africa (Robert & Daneel, 2007, p. 57), and South Korea (Joo, 2007, p. 105). Proponents of the usage of Indigenous drums in worship argue that the drum is simply an instrument, and although it is associated with non-Christian Indigenous spirituality, it can be “redeemed” by Christ and used in Christian worship. Similarly, smudging is a practice used in praying to the Creator (Robinson, 2018, para. 3), and so it can be used by Indigenous Christians to pray to God in the same way. Doing so simply makes worship contextual for Indigenous people, and removes a barrier for them to participate in worship. Proponents of contextualization argue that blocking Indigenous culture from the church is a religious guise for racism, and the still-prevalent colonial attitude that exalts Western Christian culture and demonizes other cultures. In this mindset, the job of those doing Indigenous ministry is to share the gospel in a way that makes sense and is relatable to those in the Indigenous culture.

Here is an example of an argument from someone who is pro-contextualization:

People come into the centre, and they smell something [burning sweetgrass], and they ask what that smell is because it reminds me of their grandma. And we tell them about it and ask if they know what Grandma was doing when she burned the sweetgrass, and they say no, so we explain that she was praying. And this opens the door to conversations about spirituality, and it leads to a faith journey with the Creator. Indigenous people aren't animistic. They don't believe everything has a spirit, they believe there is spirit present in everything. That's the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is always present in and around creation. First Nations people have just always recognized this.

#### *Anti-Contextualization*

In contrast, those who are anti-contextualization argue that elements such as drums and smudges are not simply neutral cultural practices that can be brought into Christianity, but spiritual practices that connect the worshipper to something other than God and are even opposed to Christianity. These people would believe that those who convert to Christianity are being delivered from the demonic influence of

traditional Indigenous spirituality, and that converts must leave its associated elements behind. Thus, the combining of these elements into Christianity is not contextualization, but syncretism, which must be rejected in order to protect correct theology and practice in the church. In this mindset, the job of those who work with Indigenous people is to offer the gospel as deliverance from traditional Indigenous spirituality.

Here is an example of an argument from someone who is anti-contextualization:

People say that we contextualize in other countries, but even in Africa they don't use drums in their services, because the drums are part of the old demon worship. In my experience, services that incorporate the drum only bring oppression and terror, and I want nothing to do with smudging. People who didn't grow up 'traditional' are the ones who want to 'reclaim their culture.' Especially people from the Sixties Scoop—later in life they decide they want to 'reconnect with their Indigenous identity,' but when they say they want to reclaim their 'culture' they are really reclaiming that false 'religion.'

### *Position of the Evangelical Church*

At its core, the argument here is whether Indigenous culture can be a legitimate expression of Christian faith and worship, or if Indigenous culture must be transformed by Christ. There is also the question of what extent racism, unconscious or otherwise, plays a role in the issue. Unfortunately, because of the charged and highly political nature of the debate, it has largely divided the world of Indigenous ministry, and it also seems to serve as a barrier to many in the Euro-Canadian church getting involved. Indeed, while an equal number of ministries researched in this project held a strong pro- or anti-contextualization stance, a larger number claimed “no position” on the issue, even while sometimes demonstrating an obvious inclination to one side or the other.

Within the evangelical church, tendencies lean towards the anti-contextualization position. The Evangelical Fellowship of Canada (EFC) notes that “the practice of contextualization of Indigenous ceremonies in Christian worship remains a matter of controversy in some evangelical circles” (Jacobs et al., 2019, p. 9). Few evangelical organizations would claim outright hostility to contextualization, likely due to societal pressure, but they are also unlikely to embrace it. Contradictions to this rule of public declaration in the evangelical tradition include the ministries of the EFC, the Mennonite Church of Canada, and NAIITS in embracing contextualization, and the Northern Canada Evangelical Mission in strongly opposing it.

Regardless of what position one holds, the fact remains that both the pro- and anti-contextualization positions are an important part of our collective story. Taken together, this debate speaks to the topic's centrality in the story of Indigenous Ministry in Alberta, and it has far-reaching implications in both the past and the present.

### ***The State of the Indigenous Church***

An underlying issue related to the contextualization debate is the state of the Indigenous church in Canada. While interviewing Euro-Canadian participants, there was a unanimous conclusion that the state of ministry to or with Indigenous people in the Euro-Canadian church is quite poor. At the same time, a theme also emerged among some participants in debating whether or not an Indigenous church exists. It was generally felt that the Euro-Canadian church had failed to fulfill its duty to establish an Indigenous church. Participants provided one of two explanations as to why, based on their position on the issue of contextualization. Those who were pro-contextualization said that there is no Indigenous church because the Euro-Canadian church failed to properly contextualize the gospel for them. Meanwhile, those who were anti-contextualization said there is no Indigenous church because the Euro-Canadian church contextualized the gospel too much, and never allowed Christ to actually transform Indigenous culture.

Interestingly, instead of picking one side or the other when asked about this debate, Indigenous individuals tended more so to take issue with the question being asked in the first place. Rather than debating whether the Euro-Canadian church has succeeded in establishing an Indigenous church, expert in Indigenous ministry Cheryl Bear-Barnetson (2013) simply argues that the church needs to actually give and leave the gospel with Indigenous people, so they can establish their own church and their own

contextualized expression of faith (p. 66). Similarly, in response to the question of whether or not an Indigenous church exists, Ray Aldred, a leader in the Indigenous church, gave this perspective:

Maybe not one that white people can recognize. What is there doesn't take the same shape as the non-Indigenous church, but there's been a 200-year pattern: Indigenous believers gather together every Sunday afternoon, they pray together, they eat together. Then, every once in a while, some denomination tries to send someone in to form them into a Western-style church, and it all blows up, and then they take off and leave the Indigenous people alone to do their thing again. ...Indigenous faith will just never look "Catholic enough" or "Protestant enough" to the church.

In making statements about the state of the Indigenous church, wisdom advises that those from outside the Indigenous community should be cautious. It is valuable to listen to the perspective of Indigenous people themselves as to what the state of their church is. As far as the role of the Euro-Canadian church goes, it is widely understood that Indigenous ministry is not being committed to as much as the situation actually calls for—participants strongly felt that the church has a responsibility to do more. At the same time, the church should not see itself as having a duty to "save" or "establish" Indigenous peoples. Rather, the responsibility of the church appears to fall somewhere between these two realities.

### ***Residential Schools and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission***

Another current issue impacting the story of Indigenous ministry in Alberta is the legacy of the TRC. To provide an entire background on this commission, the factors that led to it, and its effect on the church is outside of the scope of this paper. To learn more about the commission, and to access its resources, visit <http://www.trc.ca/>. For a brief explanation of the commission as it relates to our project, see the definitions for "Truth and Reconciliation Commission," "Reconciliation," and "Calls to Action" above, in the Terminology and Definitions section.

In the eyes of many involved in both Indigenous ministry and the Indigenous community, the actions and understandings presented in the TRC Report and Calls to Actions serves as the best framework for reconciliation available. These understandings are based around the need to acknowledge and repent of current and past wrongs inflicted against Indigenous peoples, and a commitment to intentionally move forward together in the spirit of reconciliation.

The evangelical church has had a mixed response to the TRC. Because of their late arrival in colonial Canada, they were largely uninvolved in the Residential School system. As a result, the evangelical denominations are not directly addressed by the TRC Report and Calls to Action, which were based on the legal case involving the denominations that ran residential schools. However, this does not mean that the evangelical church was blameless in their actions and attitudes towards Indigenous peoples during the same period.

In addition, the TRC Calls to Action include calls that are directed to the church outside of the denominations that were party to the Settlement Agreement, including:

48. We call upon the church parties to the Settlement Agreement, and all other faith groups and interfaith social justice groups in Canada who have not already done so, to formally adopt and comply with the principles, norms, and standards of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples [UNDRIP] as a framework for reconciliation. This would include, but not be limited to, the following commitments:

- i. Ensuring that their institutions, policies, programs, and practices comply with the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.
- ii. Respecting Indigenous peoples' right to self determination in spiritual matters, including the right to practise, develop, and teach their own spiritual and religious traditions, customs, and ceremonies, consistent with Article 12:1 of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.
- iii. Engaging in ongoing public dialogue and actions to support the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.

iv. Issuing a statement no later than March 31, 2016, from all religious denominations and faith groups, as to how they will implement the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.

49. We call upon all religious denominations and faith groups who have not already done so to repudiate concepts used to justify European sovereignty over Indigenous lands and peoples, such as the Doctrine of Discovery and terra nullius. (The Truth and Reconciliation Commission, 2015, p. 5)

Notably, evangelical denominations have largely not responded in full accordance with these calls to action. According to the Evangelical Fellowship of Canada,

Some evangelical communities have supported Indigenous rights to self-government in public support for the TRC's Call to Action #48 to uphold the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples as a framework for reconciliation. The reality is, however, that broadly speaking, evangelicals are similar to the general population of Canada in their ignorance of and indifference to solemn their treaty responsibilities. (Jacobs et al., 2019, pp. 8-9)

Individual denominations vary in whether or not they have formally and publicly adopted UNDRIP, engaged in reconciliation initiatives and dialogue, issued formal apologies or statements regarding past mistakes, or repudiated the concepts behind European sovereignty. However, they may engage in missions to Indigenous peoples outside of the framework of the TRC, according to guiding theological principles such as evangelism and discipleship.

### ***Contemporary Issues as Barriers to Engagement***

Unfortunately, issues such as the contextualization debate and TRC responsibilities can serve as significant barriers to churches taking on the responsibility to reach out to their Indigenous neighbours. One research participant explained that churches have a difficult time navigating their response to the TRC because "it's a political issue, and a very charged one. But it's also essentially a relational issue. And the two can't be separated." Such a dimension makes the normal ministry of the church, which is intensely relational, into a political minefield that individuals may not feel equipped to navigate. Another research participant observed that:

For a lot of people, Indigenous ministry is just unknown—this is very common. There's also a fear of it. Fear of not doing it the right way. Fear of not knowing what to get involved in and what not to get involved in. Fear that it might cost too much. But there's also a growing awareness that something has gone wrong, and that something has to change.

The evangelical church as a whole is far from having a confident and unified response to these controversial issues that can guide them into meaningful ministry that takes responsibility for the past and strives to move forwards in healing and reconciliation. However, as the aforementioned research participant observed, there is an awareness that something needs to be done, and that what is currently being done needs to be done better.

## **Conclusion**

The relationship between the evangelical church and Indigenous people in the land that we now call Alberta has historically been fraught with difficulties, and even today is marked by hesitancy, confusion, and controversy. However, as to the future, this relationship is uniquely poised to enter a new era marked by learning, reconciliation, and partnership.

This relationship differs from that of the Catholic and mainline Protestant denominations, which are distinct from the evangelical church both theologically and in terms of corporate responsibility regarding their relationship with Indigenous peoples. Although the Catholic and mainline Protestant denominations have been held to account by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission and their role in the residential school system, evangelical denominations have been able to get by without doing as much in the way of reflection and reconciliation. Rather than being involved in the residential schools, the

evangelical church put its efforts into missions to “save” Indigenous peoples through traditional evangelism and the planting of Western-style churches, particularly in the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

As we crossed into the new decade, this energy waned as the contextualization and reconciliation movements began to bring prevailing ministry philosophies into question. Over time, willingness to engage with Indigenous peoples was lost to burnout, staff turnover, and political challenge. Today, some Indigenous ministries exist but they are often underfunded, under supported, and disconnected from each other. However, as these ministries begin to see Indigenous Christians themselves rising up to take leadership in the Indigenous church under new models of ministry based on Indigenous sovereignty, evangelical missionary organizations have found themselves reevaluating their models of ministry.

In order to move forward, the evangelical church finds itself needing to formulate answers to two contemporary issues within the world of Indigenous ministry. These two topics, the debate surrounding contextualization and one’s response to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, present two of the most controversial issues currently affecting the landscape of Indigenous ministry. They are highly involved both with the Indigenous church’s ability to develop and flourish, and in shaping the relationship dynamic between the Indigenous church and the wider evangelical church. As for the evangelical church, the result has been a stagnation in and avoidance of relationship with Indigenous Christians. As this relationship becomes increasingly political, Euro-Canadian evangelicals find themselves avoiding meaningful interactions altogether, either due to feeling unequipped to navigate this relational minefield, or due to a hesitance to abandon tradition or compromise on beliefs. In order to progress, the evangelical church must come to terms with past and current issues, and, in doing so, take up the task of relationship once again. This task may be uncomfortable and daunting, but Christ-like, self-sacrificial love always is.

The current state of Indigenous ministry in the evangelical church in Alberta is marked by controversy, hesitancy, and a lack of understanding. However, both history and contemporary voices speak to a clear need for the church to do more than it currently is. Generally speaking, the church itself hears this call and realizes that the need for it; however, it does not yet know how to accomplish what is needed. The relationship between Indigenous peoples and the Christian church has gone through intense growing pains in the last few decades, and as a result, we are undergoing a period of transition regarding the role of the church. If the church desires to take charge of their future story, it is important that they learn from their past story and use it to put time, effort, and resources into determining what their relationship with Indigenous peoples will look like in the coming years. By seeking reconciliation in humility, committing to reflection on our past and future, and intentionally engaging in relationship, we can carve out a story side-by-side with our Indigenous neighbours that is marked by mutual growth and equal partnership, together in Christ.

## References

- Bear-Barnetson, C. (2013). *Introduction to First Nations ministry*. Cherohala Press.
- Berry, S., & Brink, J. (2004). *Aboriginal cultures in Alberta: Five hundred generations*. University of Alberta.
- Government of Canada. (2017, May 2). *First Nations in Canada*. <https://www.rcaanc-cirnac.gc.ca/eng/1307460755710/1536862806124>
- Jacobs, A., Van Ginkel, A., Lefebvre, A., Arnold, J., Spargur, J., Gordon, J., Beazley, J., Hogeterp, M., Russell, S., & Heinrichs, S. (2019). *Stewarding sacred seeds. The Evangelical Fellowship of Canada*. <https://files.evangelicalfellowship.ca/si/Indigenous/Indigenous-StewardingSacredSeeds.pdf>
- Joo, S. J. (2007). A traditional Thanksgiving festival in South Korea: Chusok. In C. E. Farhadian (Ed.), *Christian worship worldwide: expanding horizons, deepening practices*. Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing.
- Leblanc, T., & Leblanc, J. (2011). *NAIITS: contextual mission, indigenous context*. *Missiology*, 39(1), 87-100. [https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Terry\\_Leblanc2/publication/258172101\\_NAIITS\\_Contextual\\_Mission\\_Indigenous\\_Context/links/546b73c00cf20dedafd530c9.pdf](https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Terry_Leblanc2/publication/258172101_NAIITS_Contextual_Mission_Indigenous_Context/links/546b73c00cf20dedafd530c9.pdf)
- Palmer, H. (1990). *Alberta: A new history*. Hurtig Publishers.
- Priest, R. J. (2007). Worship in the Amazon: The case of the Aguaruna Evangelical Church. In C. E. Farhadian (Ed.), *Christian worship worldwide: expanding horizons, deepening practices*. Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing.
- Robert, D. L., Daneel, M. L. (2007). Worship among apostles and Zionists in Southern Africa, Zimbabwe. In C. E. Farhadian (Ed.), *Christian worship worldwide: expanding horizons, deepening practices*. Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing.
- Robinson, A. (2018, May 4). *Smudging*. <https://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/smudging>
- Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada. (2015). *Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada: Calls to action*.



## Book Review



---

Mittelstadt, M.W. & Courtney, C. H. (eds.). (2021) *Canadian Pentecostal Reader: The First Generation of Pentecostal Voices in Canada (1907–1925)*

Cleveland, TN, USA: CPT Press. 507 pp, ISBN: 1953358080

Pentecostals are people of story. We gravitate to the narrative account of the early church in Acts, giving it a special place in our theology. We prioritize the testimony of what God has done and is doing. We see ourselves as part of God's ongoing story. Yet, we do not know the story of our Pentecostal movement in Canada very well. This is not entirely surprising as writings from these early years have been difficult to access, and because of the nature of these early writings.

To begin with the nature of these writings, Mittelstadt and Courtney note how early Canadian Pentecostals were not focused on preserving history for future generations. Yes, they were eager to testify of what God was doing, and they wrote many newsletters sharing their testimonies, but this was not out of a concern for preserving history. It was about announcing the imminent return of Christ. Time was short and so they did not think of recording lengthy histories for future generations. Still, these early newsletters contain a rich account of the early years of our movement.

As to the issue of accessibility, these early writings have now been made accessible in the *Canadian Pentecostal Reader*. Mittelstadt and Courtney have gathered these early writings into one volume. Their aim in making these writings widely accessible is not to bring us back to some golden era, but to provide us with the texts that can help us understand things the way they were, to understand the story of our movement. They have reproduced all early Pentecostal writing from 1907–1925, except for *The Canadian Pentecostal Testimony*, an official publication from the Pentecostal Assemblies of Canada, as it can be found online. 1907 marks the first publication in Canada and 1925 serves as a natural ending point for this collection because this is when eastern and western Pentecostal groups came together under the Pentecostal Assemblies of Canada's (PAOC) 1919 charter.

The book is organized around geography and publication dates. Each chapter begins with a brief introduction from the editors on the people and their publication, as well as suggested reading for more information. Then they reproduce the primary sources, intentionally including the dimensions and layout of the original publications so that the reader has in mind what the original copies would have looked like.

The first chapter takes us to East End Mission in Toronto. It is necessary to begin with Ellen and James Hebden, and their newsletter *The Promise*, because their ministry influenced many subsequent leaders in the Canadian Pentecostal movement. Chapter two stays in Toronto but jumps forward to the 1924 magazine *The Gospel of Sunshine* produced by Willard and Christine Peirce. Next we move to Winnipeg. Chapter three focuses on the Argue family, reproducing the *Apostolic Messenger* from 1908 and *The Revival Broadcast* from 1923. Chapter four reproduces the surviving copies of Frank Small's *Living Waters* from 1918–1924.

Chapter five returns east to Ottawa where we read *The Good Report* published by R.E. McAlister, H.E. Randall, and H.K. Lawler which includes theological and doctrinal discussions. Then we move through Western Canada, first stopping in Saskatoon to read the *Saskatchewan Revival News* published by O.J. Lovik (chapter five) before making it to British Columbia, where we find Margaret Peden and Ella Andrews' *The Good News Bulletin* from New Westminster in chapter seven, and H.B. Taylor's *The Pyramid Temple Bulletin* in Vancouver.

This is then followed by a bibliography on further resources—that look at this early period of Pentecostalism in Canada—organized around six categories: (1) periodicals from 1907–1925; (2) reference

works; (3) histories; (4) related books, chapters, and articles; (5) theses and dissertations; and (6) the digital archives and databases the editors used in compiling this volume.

One drawback of this volume is the lack of an index. If you are wanting to use this book for research purposes, the editors recommend purchasing it in electronic format. It is helpful to be able to search through the early writings for certain topics or the use of certain Scriptures. However, early Pentecostals did not always cite Scripture when quoting or paraphrasing it, which makes some Scripture references more difficult to search. An index would have also been beneficial to see at a glance key issues, concepts, people, or Scriptures, that are prominent across all of these early writings from across Canada.

Still, this book is a great resource. These early Canadian Pentecostal writings have much to offer readers today. They include a variety of writing including testimonies, historical and biographical accounts, theological discussions, and devotional materials. Through studying these early accounts of our movement we can learn early Canadian methods, philosophies and worldviews, and biblical justifications for faith and practice. We can even see their theology and practices change as they wrestle through different doctrinal disputes. I highly recommend this book for both research purposes and devotional use. One can gain a great understanding of the story of our movement's early years while also being stirred toward a fresh move of God in our day.

**Reviewed By:**

JAMES MACKNIGHT serves as adjunct faculty at Vanguard College and Masters College & Seminary. He holds a B.A. in Theology from Vanguard College (Music Ministry major, Biblical Studies Minor), and a M.A in Theology from University of St. Michael's College (Hebrew Bible).



## Book Review



---

Stratton, T. (2020) *Human Freedom, Divine Knowledge, and Mere Molinism: A Biblical, Historical, Theological, and Philosophical Analysis*.

Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock. 328 pages, ISBN: 1725276119

Do we really have free-will? Are our choices true reflections of free-will or are one's choices predetermined by irresistible grace, as forwarded by Calvinist theology, or instinct, as supposed by Darwinian evolution? This debate—whether humans act on free-will or by deeply embedded instincts—is not just between secularists and theists. These questions seemingly have been part of philosophical and theological dialogue since before the infancy of the Church. Passages like Matt 22:14, Eph 2:10 and 1 Pet 1:1-2 seem to promote the idea of predetermination while Matt 23:37, Gal 5:13, and 2 Pet 1:5-7 proffer the idea of free-will. The debate exists within Christian thought typically between Calvinism and Arminianism. It impacts not only theology but also how the Church may engage a post-modern culture.

Dr. Stratton offers an excellent study of human free-will as part of divine design and sovereignty. For the theologian the text offers a comprehensive study of human free-will and its treatment within Christian thought. For the apologist, it unfolds how free-will and God's middle knowledge support classic apologetic arguments for the existence of God. This is an important reading that helps Christians understand key points of faith and makes practical connections with theology to everyday living. Stratton draws on historical Christian theology infused with apologetics to inform Christian evangelism in a post-modern society.

The author begins by addressing the common assumptions about free-will as used in theology and philosophy. He regards atheist Sam Harris' position, "Free will is an illusion," as an echo of divine determinism (p.2). Stratton responds by developing a working definition of Libertarian Free Will (LFW) that balances individual ability, uncton, and moral responsibility for their choices to support the rest of the work (p.160-1).

The author then focuses his attention on how both secular evolution theory and theological determinism runs shy to explain human choice and action. Stratton challenges Calvinist determinism by arguing the essential characteristic of *imago dei* is the ability to choose. Stratton argues that if determinism is true, then individuals could excuse themselves from the responsibility for their actions (p.163). The author pushes back against this idea by dissecting Calvinist theology of predeterminism. However, in doing so, it seems Stratton becomes a bit too bullish challenging Calvinism and perhaps misses the irresistibility of God's grace with the dynamic of the Holy Spirit.

Stratton then attends to the atheist's ideas of determinism. He offers an elegant apologetic syllogism referred to as, the Freethinking Argument against Evolutionary Naturalism (p.167). It is a logical and precise challenge that hollows out secularist rationality and reveals the want of theological determinism. He moves on with a series of apologetic discussions to further highlight LFW as more than academic exercise; it is also an important apologetic tool in evangelism. Stratton establishes LFW not only as evidence of God's existence, but also humanity's capacity to choose as a reflection of God. He backs his argument by drawing on several points of Scripture that clearly support the idea of LFW and moral responsibility (p.180-1; 192). Stratton leaves the idea of determinism standing alone within a philosophical wilderness without any rational ground to stand on.

The author then addresses the matter of divine knowledge. It is an important concept as it connects the dots between what God knows and LFW. Stratton draws on the work of a 16<sup>th</sup> century monk named Luis de Molina to forward what may be a lost key in theology and apologetics. The author unfolds how de Molina's idea of "middle knowledge" brings together God's natural knowledge and God's free knowledge. It is this bridge that possibly leaves Calvinist theology fragmented. Molina defines middle knowledge as "what God knows logically prior to His decision to create the world of what would happen in any possible scenarios" (p.220). Stratton tests this idea against God's omniscience, omnibenevolence, and omnipotence to demonstrate that God does not causally determine people to think, act, or believe in a certain way.

Stratton devotes the rest of his book to an examination of Molina's idea of God's middle knowledge through the crucible of each classic apologetic argument for the existence of God. This is vital for both theologian, apologist, pastor, and lay person. Contemporary western society is flush with self-styled philosophy or rational science that attempts to nullify the viability of Christianity. Stratton furnishes the believer with the means to see the beauty, elegance, and simplicity of LFW as a significant apologetic to argue for the existence of God, the presence of evil (p.258), and the dynamics of prayer (p.268-88). Moreover, it affirms for the believer who they are as a child of God because each believer is imbued with LFW. Therefore, by possessing LFW each person has access to a relationship with God who knows them and understand the struggles of human experience.

Stratton's years in youth ministry serve to inform him how to make complex theological principles understandable. This book anchors the believer to Christianity's historical theological roots. It connects us to the foundational New Testament idea of an eternal destiny and what it means to experience freedom in Christ but not freedom from Christ. Moreover, it brings in to focus ancient theology and classic apologetics with practical language for today's Christian witness.

### **Reviewed By:**

GORD SMITH is a graduate of NBC (1989) and pastored in Edmonton. He transitioned to a 25 year career in Social Work. Gord recently completed a Doctorate in Religious Studies focusing on Christian Apologetics and Culture.



## *Creative Submission: Art & Prose*



---

### Dying to Us

---

We rounded the corner and passed through the swinging brown church doors opened by a childhood friend who watched me grow up, me tripping in flowing white lace fighting to balance a bouquet of evergreen in one arm and another clinging to my Fathers armpit stuffed into a grey suit.

Yet the real fight was to try to balance my eyes, trying to take it all in, trying to lock eyes with every person there because there were too many staring eyes, all looking at *me*, and I was still desperate to meet all the layers of expectation those eyes had piled on me with every move I made growing up.

He whispered in my ear, “Take it all in, all these people are here for *you*.”

And, just like I had done for the entirety of my life, I tried. I tried to connect, tried to absorb, tried to please every dress and cardigan clad woman in that room and absorb it all.

This was the moment a young girl waits for, dreams of, when everyone in her life stands and watches her presence enter a room and acknowledges *her*.

*But just like every other moment in my life, the pressure from people stole away from the presence of the moment and I faltered.*

My breath caught in my throat, and my eyes couldn't move fast enough to all 342 grinning faces and all of the sudden we were at the end of the aisle and I finally notice the nervous blonde boy tripping down the steps to come replace my Fathers armpit with his warm hand.

And he whispers in my ear that I am beautiful, and I smile weakly back, realizing that I straight up forgot to look at my own husband as I walked down the aisle of my own wedding.

I was consumed by my interpretation of my Fathers words, desperate to please them and his instructions and meet their never ending church pew sitting expectations, as if that would fulfill this ever nagging desire to be approved and accepted as a Pastors kid.

They tell me when I walked through those doors, the one I was most loved and accepted by in that entire room, broke down and cried when his eyes met mine.

And I didn't even witness it.

I didn't even see those tears, because our eyes didn't quite meet; mine were racing about and fell firstly on the bouncy red head grinning a little bit too wide on the 5th church pew to the right.

Anonymous, Dying to Us

I couldn't get that moment back. Ever. I tried to drown my frustration of letting people pleasing win yet again by hoping and praying that most likely at least the video guy caught my husbands face on camera, so I could pretend to relive the 'most precious moment of my life'.

He didn't.

And neither did the hip photographer with the DSLR camera that shoots 20 photos every second.

They were like everyone else.

Their eyes and lenses focused on me, and my grimacing forced smile and darting eyes under the layer of cover up hiding a week of sleepless nights.

Doing what I always had done; Frantically and hastily meeting the eyes brim full of expectations and plans for my life, on my right and left, and neglecting to look up at the One with the tears in his eyes because of the love he has for me as his bride.

Frantically trying to please the people and forgetting about the love that is there, continuously, always.

That was the end in some senses, and the beginning in another sense.

It was the beginning of a death to what I had known, a death to what I thought ministry needed to entail. It represented a slow dying process in marriage that carried over to my life as a whole.

Would I choose to stay focused on the eyes that were always searching for me, or would I stray to please the people around me?

Would we choose to be broken and die to self in this process of marriage, in ministry, always looking to the father?

Or would we be forever distracted by the ever needing demands of others, or even of each other?

I am learning, we are learning. There is great growth in the dying process. But the dying must be leading me to focus my eyes straight down the aisle, into *His* eyes, not into the eyes of the people.

For it is only in dying that we can ever become like Him. And it is only in becoming like Him that we can ever give anything good to the people staring back at us.





### **ARTIST STATEMENT**

In my younger days it was easy to see the command 'to die to yourself' in the heroic, outer ways that often allude to outward praise; Going to intense places for the gospel, late nights and early mornings, all for the sake of the "kingdom". Always seeing busyness next to godliness.

And then you get married and begin to do ministry with your spouse, and realize that maybe the most impactful deaths to self aren't the ones that look great and heroic on the outside, but rather, are those that no one else sees or gives you credit for.

My husband's eyes don't sparkle naively like they did on our wedding day, but there is deep wisdom and humility in them now. It came from the knowing that the death Christ calls us to is that slow, underground breaking, where no one else sees or pats us on the back.

Maybe it is not in valiant attempts to be a great ambassador for the gospel that we die to self, but rather, in the small ways of continuing to let our spouses and children be used to refine us and define us in ways that ministry cannot.

It can be easy to hide behind the facade of a great looking, sacrificial life. But the reality is, when marriage and ministry come together, we must be willing to lean in together, and let ourselves die to what we have known in order to make His name known.

That might mean slow seasons of leaning in together and letting the death of us prevail so that something of worth may eventually sprout.

**“Truly, truly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit.” John 12:24**

### **ARTIST BIO**

Author is a Vanguard College alumna that wrestles with accepting the ways that things have always been done and seeking to live life in a way that challenges cultural norms. They do this by living cross culturally here in Canada and sharing the ways and life of Jesus with youth from various religious and cultural backgrounds. They have chosen to remain anonymous to protect those youth and this ministry.



## Creative Nonfiction



---

# The Hour of Salvation

## *A biblical survey of the Church's relation to time*

Joel D. Bendixen, Vanguard College Alumni.<sup>1</sup>

---

The church has history, testimonies of triumph and tales of tragedy. The church also has plans, budgets and growth charts, statistics, and think tanks. But what does a proper ecclesiastical relation to yesterday look like? The pedagogical application of history may aid our trajectory, but it can also become a stumbling block. In error, we allow days-past to haunt our troubled mind. Moreover, adding compound-to-injury, we worry about tomorrow. We attempt to map the course ahead; projecting, forecasting—leveraging our best and brightest. But is this an exercise in futility? We are a people of stories, naturally carrying the memory of days past: *homo-memoria*. We are also anxious for the future, worried what tomorrow holds: *homo-futurum*. Where these two axes meet is what I would like to call our *kairos*; the moment where we choose to follow Christ. Now is the only moment where we are given sovereignty. Yesterday is set and tomorrow is unknown; only today is within our grasp. This essay will explore the biblical implication of *kairos*, and by God's grace, challenge the church to choose this day who we will serve.

The theme at hand is presented with stunning lucidity in Paul's letter to the church at Ephesus:

In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace, which he lavished upon us, in all wisdom and insight making known to us the mystery of his will, according to his purpose, which he set forth in Christ as a plan for the fullness of time, to unite all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth (Ephesians 1:7-10)<sup>2</sup>

It is *time* that the English Standard Version translators have chosen to use for *καίρος* (*kairos*). The term is translated elsewhere as:

- ∞ *opportunity*: "Conduct yourselves with wisdom toward outsiders, making the most the *opportunity*" (Colossians 4:5);
- ∞ *time of harvest*: "Allow both to grow together until the harvest and in the *time of the harvest* I will tell the reapers, 'Gather the weeds first and bind them in bundles to be burned, but gather the wheat into my barn'" (Matthew 13:30); and
- ∞ *acceptable time*: "Behold, now is *the acceptable time*, behold, now is the day of salvation" (2 Corinthians 6:2).

Indeed, now is the acceptable time. Now is the only acceptable time. Our past, present, and future must first go through Friday's execution before we meet Sunday's resurrection. We look forward, "forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead" (Philippians 3:13).

No doubt, wisdom would teach us to learn from our mistakes, but wisdom is not Gospel. There is a fundamental difference between learning from our mistakes and granting the enemy room to haunt us. If our omniscient Father has declared, "I will remember their sin no more," (Jeremiah 31:34) who are we to remember? This means forgiving ourselves, others, and even the Church. We cannot be bogged down with yesterday's trespasses. We push on. This is our *kairos*. In the Ephesians passage previously

---

<sup>1</sup> The author graduated from Vanguard College with a degree in Religious Studies and is passionate about Christ, His Church, and His coming again in power and glory.

<sup>2</sup> All Scripture references are from The Holy Bible: English Standard Version (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016)

mentioned, Paul writes, “In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses” (Ephesians 1:7). This is the lens through which we see our past, and not only our own past, but the history and transgressions of others. We forgive ourselves and our perpetrators. When we see our past through Calvary, we see with the Romans 8:28 promise, “And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose.” It means abuse, despotism, and regret are seen through the redemptive work of Christ. We trust that our Lord who created *ex nihilo* can redeem even our most grievous failures, making beauty from ashes, turning joy into mourning, and pulling life from the grave.

Just as our memory is filtered through the lens of Calvary, so too is our vision of tomorrow. Paul continues in Ephesians, “in all wisdom and insight making known to us the mystery of his will, according to his purpose, which he set forth in Christ” (Ephesians 1:9). It is in Christ that we understand the mystery of God’s will and purpose. When we consider what tomorrow holds, we must start and end with Christ. It is only through Him that tomorrow is secure. James poignantly penned, “you do not know what tomorrow will bring” (James 4:14). And Jesus is recorded as saying, “do not be anxious about tomorrow, for tomorrow will be anxious for itself” (Matthew 6:34). Proverbs tells us, “The heart of man plans his way, but the Lord establishes his steps” (Proverbs 16:9). We plan, “build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat their produce,” (Jeremiah 29:5) but we trust that in Christ alone is our tomorrow secure.

Paul continues, “[God] set forth in Christ as a plan for the fullness of time” (Ephesians 1:9-10). Christ is our plan; He is the *Telos* of time itself, the Cosmic *Kairos*. The implications for this are beyond measure. We long for purpose, legacy, and excellence; noble pursuits to be sure, but they must be filtered through the Ancient of Days. Christ is life (John 14:6). In Him we live and move and have our being (Acts 17:28). He is the Vine in which we bear much fruit (John 15:5); the One who’s yoke is easy, and burden is light (Matthew 11:30). Any movement onward from this very moment, outside of Christ, will bring death. He is life. When we decided like Joshua, “as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord” (Joshua 24:15), we step into streams of living water and our future becomes secure. Indeed, words fail in this regard, for *security* does no justice to the perfect certainty in which our tomorrow lies in Christ. He is the First and Last, the Alpha and Omega, the Beginning and End (Revelation 22:13). Who else should we trust our future to? In faith, may our prayer be like that of David’s, “My times are in your hand” (Psalms 31:15). May we be a Church who gives our tomorrow to its rightful owner.

Seeing yesterday through grace and tomorrow in mercy, we have only today. This very moment. Here is where we are given sovereignty. I invite the reader to see Mordecai’s rhetorical question to Esther as a watchword: “And who knows whether you have not come to the kingdom for such a time as this?” (Esther 4:14). Today is our moment; today is the hour of salvation. Today we are invited to find our all in Christ, “forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead” (Philippians 3:13). Resting in the confidence of a loving Father, the One who made the clouds its garment, who calls forth the morning, the One who walks the recess of the deep, who says to the tide, “this far you may come and no further” (Job 38:11). Our future is secure, our past is forgiven. Let us once more take hold of the *kairos* we find in Christ.



## Creative Reflection



---

### Weakness is a Virtue:

*Maybe we are missing something big in our missions strategies*

---

#### ARTIST STATEMENT

*The last couple years of my life have been an unraveling of all I thought I was, and of all I knew to be true. It has been a season of burnout in many ways, and for a long time. I blamed spiritual warfare, or the enemy, believing the lie that God desires for us to continually “go hard”.*

*This piece was written on a recent trip to East Africa, where God brought to the surface a lot of pride in me and revealed lies that we as the Church believe about our role in the Great Commission. Through having been broken physically and emotionally, God is consistently showing me that people are attracted to Grace that works within us, not the strength that we conjure out of our own effort to impress others with the gospel.*

---

The psychiatrist told me not to come here.

He said I was too high on the PTSD risk scale, had too many signs of depression and anxiety, and that it would be healthier for me to stay home instead.

I decided not to listen to him. After all, I am the one that goes hard, not home.

*We felt like we needed to visit overseas so we could think and pray about moving there in the future. Even though it had been a year of major struggles, I was going hard, not staying home.*

*God had been clear that we were to go and I was convinced this psychiatrist was in the way of me valiantly following God's voice.*

My husband and I work with newcomers and refugees in the city. I had just come out of a two year period of pretty intense burnout and health issues. I was reeling, trying to figure out how this could happen, why would God allow this to happen, when I was desiring so strongly for the unreached to know Him? This wasn't supposed to happen when you were on fundraised support, when you had done a four year degree in intercultural studies, when you knew all the stuff.

But looking back at that time period, and the current struggle to continue, I have had to realize, maybe this was the only way. Maybe this time of emotional breakdowns and raw vulnerability before my friends and neighbours was the only way for them to actually see Jesus, not just myself.

But now, here was this psychiatrist telling me I couldn't go. Did he know the experience that I had, the countries I had lived in, the training I had done? Did he know I was a pastor's kid, that I was prepared and equipped for pressure and hard situations? That I was ready now?

Anonymous, Weakness is a Virtue

*Did he know who I was?*

The brutal reality of it all was this: I didn't know who I was.

I didn't know that, as people who are sometimes desperate to represent the gospel and proclaim that we have it all together, sometimes the most godly thing we can do is surrender and sit down.

It is in weakness that we experience Christ for ourselves, and in suffering and vulnerability that others experience Christ in and through us. Any other way, it turns into a self flaunting, supporter-bragging ministry that I am afraid far too many of us have accepted as the only way.

I used to be a good global worker.

I used to be intentional with my every decision, even praying as I ran down crowded streets, asking God which way to go, as if every interaction must be used for some glorious story that I could write home about and impress all the supporters.

I used to push hard in language learning, striving endlessly to perfect pronunciations - often more so for the glory of man, rather to share hope itself.

I had taken four years of intercultural studies, I had worked with and trained with the best. I knew how to say good goodbyes and happy hellos and how to weave intentionality into every waking moment.

But I didn't understand what it meant that when we are weak, that's when He actually gets the glory and not ourselves.

I didn't understand that maybe admitting our weakness was actually the only way to point others to Jesus and not just to the straw and hay of our own hands.

So, we went to the red dirt soil of another country anyway, and were smacked in the face with the reality of western global work and NGO's, and how quick and easy it is for us to flaunt ourselves and our strengths and forget all together about why Christ came in the first place.

The man sits across from us, a Pepsi in hand and a "Got Jesus" shirt on his back, his chair tipped back, and his honesty spilled out:

"The problem with you guys from the West," he says carefully and respectfully, "is that you always come here wanting to teach. But maybe God wants you to come here to learn. Maybe He has you coming here to *grow you, not to fix us.*"

Maybe that is the crux of this all. Maybe that's the issue with traditional missions, with the entanglement of hero complexes and colonialism in the past, with the damage we have done in desperate attempts to prove something or teach something, and we forget that our Saviour Himself came in humility and in the weakness of a frail human being.

Maybe there is a point to that.

Maybe the whole problem is that we have been trying so dang hard to be perfect representations of Christ in our ministries that we have missed the reason why Christ came in the first place.

## Anonymous, Weakness is a Virtue

Because, we are frail and weak human beings. And others need to see that we are weak and frail humans because they know they are too. Sometimes it's nice to not feel so bad about yourself and embrace have a need for God to fix, instead of being a mighty missionary.

Maybe they don't need a strapping young hero, dressed in safari clothes, seeking to accomplish and discover great and mighty things - with a dash of evangelism sprinkled in. (David Livingstone did great things for God, but he wasn't perfect either, and maybe it's ok to actually acknowledge that).

*Maybe others are not actually rejecting the gospel after all, but rather, rejecting us and our interpretation of what it means to bring the gospel across cultures to them.*

*Maybe the gospel hasn't spread because we are trying to spread our own agendas and cultural competencies, and not Grace Himself.*

We are convinced that we have to protect and proclaim the name of Christ through the means of being the strong and powerful ones that hold true to our systems, our doctrines, and our ways of doing things above all else.

We are convinced that our education, our "go hard" mentality and our push and effort for miracles and programs will bring the breakthrough necessary in peoples lives.

And yet, He was broken. He was humbled, He was made weak.  
So, how in the world, could we ever expect him to use *us* in any other way?

---

### ARTIST BIO

Author is a Vanguard College alumnus that wrestles with accepting the ways that things have always been done and seeking to live life in a way that challenges cultural norms. They do this by living cross culturally here in Canada and sharing the ways and life of Jesus with youth from various religious and cultural backgrounds. They have chosen to remain anonymous to protect those youth and this ministry.



## Creative Submission: Poetry



---

### When the Son Had Risen

Dr. John W. Telman, Vanguard College Alumni.

---

When the Son Had Risen the darkness ran away  
It had no power to resist the Son  
It schemed and tried but it faded away  
When the Son Had Risen

When the Son Had Risen the birds sang their praise  
The world and its tenants all celebrated  
They warmed at the glow of the Son  
When the Son Had Risen

When the Son Had Risen victory was secured  
The brilliance of his glory filled the world  
It stood as the proof of eternal life  
When the Son Had Risen

When the Son Had Risen joy had arrived with her friend peace  
They shared the truth of life and love  
The world rejoiced and danced with them  
When the Son Had Risen

When the Son Had Risen all fear but one was dismissed  
The sovereign took his rightful place of honor  
All creation bowed in humble adoration  
When the Son Had Risen

---

#### ARTIST BIO

John W. Telman, D. Min. is a graduate of Vanguard (NBC '84) where he earned a Bachelor of Theology. He's authored five published books and has been a pastor for 28 years in Canada, the USA and Singapore.





# **VJTM** wants you!

**READ** Interested in reading VJTM? Sign up for our newsletter by registering at [vangd.ca/lib/register](http://vangd.ca/lib/register)! You will be notified of each issue as it is published.

**SUBMIT** Interested in writing for VJTM? Visit [vangd.ca/lib/submit](http://vangd.ca/lib/submit) for more information! The deadline to submit for our fall 2023 issue is May 26th, 2023.

**SERVE** We are recruiting peer reviewers, copy editors, and editorial board members. **Peer reviewers** are everyday people like you who have some experience to share. If you have the time to read through and comment on an article every once in a while, sign up to be a peer reviewer at [vangd.ca/lib/register](http://vangd.ca/lib/register)!

**Copyeditors and editorial board members** are involved in the editing and production of articles once they have been accepted for publication. If you're interested in being a part of our team, send us an email at [vjtm@vanguardcollege.com](mailto:vjtm@vanguardcollege.com) to say hello, or come find us in person!