"THE CONFLICT IS UPON US": RESISTING ECUMENISM AND HYPER-CONTEXTUALIZATION

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Recent cultural trends have increased pressure on missionaries to contextualize the gospel in an ecumenical fashion that minimizes sound theology and does injustice to the Word of God. This article examines the origins of these trends and their impact upon missions theology today. Rather than giving way to societal pressures, missionaries are called to prioritize the work of evangelistic proclamation in a manner faithful to Scripture. Missionaries should live out the exhortation given by the Apostle Paul in their preaching of the truth: "Be watchful, stand firm in the faith, act like men, be strong. Let all that you do be done in love" (1 Cor 16:14).

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Introduction[1]

On the pendulum of contextualization, how far is too far? What is acceptable? Tolerable? Unacceptable? May Muslim-background believers secretly worship Jesus in a mosque? May Buddhist-background believers still leave votive offerings in neighborhood spirit houses to appease the spirits yet secretly pray to God for protection? May a tribe in Papua New Guinea still use drums in Christian worship when drums are designed to repel evil spirits? What about New Age-background believers still employing mindfulness and yoga to achieve oneness with God's celestial energy?

Many seasoned missionaries debate degrees of contextualization. And the answers are not simple. Typically, they depend on multiple factors in a specific

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[1] Content in this article has been adapted and revised from E. D. Burns, *Ancient Gospel, Brave New World: Jesus Still Saves Sinners in Cultures of Shame, Fear, Bondage, and Weakness* (Cape Coral, FL: Founders Press, 2021), 103–35.

situation. No general rule applies to all people groups, in all languages, in all countries, at all times. Basic contextualization is a natural and normal practice of human communication. Those who are fluent in more than one language can seamlessly contextualize their meaning without much premeditated effort. Learning the local language is the key for understanding inherently the cultural paradigms and how to explain the gospel to the target people. To try to do it in English or through an interpreter will have its unavoidable pitfalls and deficiencies. As difficult as it might be, learning their heart language is the key.

God's Word transcends culture. But that does not rescind the responsibilities of communicating its timeless truths in diverse languages and human contexts. God's Word can and must be translated into other languages. And unlike man-made religions' sacred writings, we can understand the Bible's inspired meaning when it is translated into other languages.

God's Word is unique in that God speaks by the Scriptures to diverse cultural paradigms. The Word communicates its transcendent doctrines through various translations. And without abandoning all unholy remnants of the image of God in those paradigms, Scripture reorients their priorities to conform to the lordship of Christ over all things.

Once the gospel takes root in local societies and cultures, inevitably it rebukes, redefines, and renovates cultural value systems. It brings them under the scrutiny, control, and meaning of God's truth in Christ. Of those cultural value systems and orientations that the Bible and doctrine do not create and prescribe, they are neither neutral nor innocent. They might faintly reflect God's law and created order, but sin has spoiled them. They are on a collision course with the impenetrable standard of God's Word and His ways, works, and world.

Therefore, contextualizing the gospel indiscriminately to ungodly ways of thinking about the world and reality will be fundamentally flawed. All forms of thinking, belief systems, and value systems (and the individuals who espouse them) must yield to Christ's kingship. Missionaries must heed God's commands over against the world's perspectives and opinions. Movements of ecumenical partnership and interfaith dialogues have weakened among many the doctrinal boldness necessary for Great Commission service. The spirit of amicable ecumenism has led to multi-perspectival methodologies of hyper-contextualization. Ecumenism is the ground in which hyper-contextualization flourishes.

Ecumenism influences us to think that it seems humble and charitable to affirm the standpoint of a target culture's "lived experience"; however, the fact is that no melanin level, biological sex, socioeconomic bracket, or nationality render anyone more or less competent and authoritative to adjudicate God's culturally transcendent law and gospel. As the Bible says, "From now on, therefore, we regard no one according to the flesh. Even though we once regarded Christ according to the flesh, we regard him thus no longer. Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come" (2 Cor 5:16–17). God spoke the world into existence, and God speaks through His Word. Out of nothing He spoke all things into being, and through His Word He speaks new creation life into our dead souls. He wrote the Book; He makes the rules.

Instead of addressing all the historical errors of ecumenism and the missiological degrees of contextualization, this article broadly surveys the

history and consequences of some ideas, and explains why we must define and defend our doctrine. Clarity is the enemy of error. Error can abound in some cultures for generations where the missionaries communicate doctrinal ambiguity and ambivalence. This article will take into account many of the common emphases and effects of ecumenism, hyper-contextualization, standpoint theory, and multi-perspectivism.

Ecumenism's Effect on Softening Doctrine's Hard Edges

In the history of the modern era's Great Commission service, many Christian leaders have ceded evangelical theological ground to ecumenical dialogue.[2] Others have convinced themselves, in the name of unity, love, and "we-can-do-more-together-than-apart" slogans, that the promises of God in redeeming the world are conditioned upon their activism, pragmatism, or pietism. This shift from bearing witness to Christ and His coming kingdom to "living the gospel" and "building Christ's kingdom"[3] is a blend of confused ecclesiology, soteriology, and eschatology. But the insidious part of this is not in an abdication of theology, per se, but rather in the assimilation of familiar evangelical vocabulary (e.g., sin, faith, redemption, heaven, kingdom, etc.) with the priorities of humanistic utopianism. A highbrow ecumenism that unites around social causes and shallow relationships props up "influential" activism as the world's messiah. Christ, then, becomes the victim-martyr mascot, cheering on His revolutionaries of justice. And the movement's mantras of "incarnational living" through being a "faithful presence" with "winsome dialogue" are palpably exhausting. They guilt-trip God's people into believing the vacuous proviso that if the world's Christians unite around love for Jesus not doctrine, deeds not creeds, and by "living the gospel," we can then "redeem the culture" and finish the "revolution of love and justice" that Jesus started. And best of all, no pressure, "the world is watching."

Doctrinal Compromise for Kingdom Culture-Making

Twentieth-century Christianity found its progressive voice in the pen of the American activistic theologian, Walter Rauschenbusch (1861–1918). Though he came from a long legacy of theological liberalism, Rauschenbusch pioneered an American variety of Christianized activism, socialism, pietism, mysticism, volunteerism, and pragmatism. The 21st-century's social liberals, though claiming to

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[2] Ecumenism and ecumenical dialogue are typically inter-religious (or inter-faith) and cross-denominational alliances based upon a high value of perceived community around an activistic cause and a lowest-common denominator of doctrinal clarity. These alliances can either be formal (e.g., signed agreements between diverse parties) or informal (e.g., ministry-based relationships for common causes). Often there is a general agreement to the "basics" of the Christian faith, such as The Apostle's Creed. And anything more specific than that can be considered peripheral, distracting to Christ's mission, and even divisive and harmful to church unity.

[3] These are common terms that have been popularized through liberal Christian jargon and are usually related to what is typically called "incarnational" ministry. For resources that bring careful correction to this language, see Kevin DeYoung and Greg Gilbert, *What Is the Mission of the Church?: Making Sense of Social Justice Shalom and the Great Commission* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2011); Greg Gilbert and D. A. Carson, *What Is the Gospel?* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2010).

be secularists and even utopians, are the progressive offspring of Rauschenbusch's religious ideals.[4] And those religious ideals were mainlined in Protestant liberalism, which theologian J. Gresham Machen (1881–1937) boldly condemned as "contrary to the doctrines of the Christian religion" and as being "another religion."[5] The siren song for Christians is that we can successfully ensure human flourishing if we play by the rules of the liberation movement *du jour*. Of course, human flourishing is never defined nor is it ever measured. But we are shushed into never questioning motives, since everyone means well and has a good heart, and we are chided to never challenge methods, since all truth is God's truth.

Rauschenbusch famously merged an assurance of prophetic holiness with a collective feeling of belonging to a social cause: "The social gospel … fuses the Christian spirit and social consciousness." And he went on to propose that "experiences act as a kind of guide by which we test what seems to have truth and reality." He claimed that this collective process enacts "a democratic change in theology on the basis of religious experience…. An experience of religion through the medium of solidaristic social feeling is an experience of unusually high ethical quality, akin to that of the prophets of the Bible."[6] Rauschenbusch shunned a gospel where any Christian "appears before the judgment seat of Christ with $50,000,000 and its human corollaries to his credit, and then pleads a free pardon through faith in the atoning sacrifice."[7] For Rauschenbusch, just as "sin is a social force," so "salvation, too, is a social force. It is exerted by groups that are charged with divine will and love … a social organism ruled by justice, cleanness, and love. A full salvation demands a Christian social order."[8] The guilt of sin emerged from unjust social privilege, and the corresponding atonement came from following the way of Christ in mourning over the victims of their social privilege, fighting legislative battles to crush systemic injustice, and organizing social activism in any and every sphere of society. Assurance of salvation in this system grew out of a combination of feeling solidarity with other social activists around building the kingdom of God, which "is the energy of God realizing itself in human life … that is valuable in so far as [*sic*] it grows out of action for the Kingdom and impels action."[9] Rauschenbusch trumpeted the kingdom as "the revolutionary force of Christianity."[10]

Evangelical leaders in the 20th century, especially in the English-speaking world, slowly grew weary of being tarred and feathered by the institutional elites as either narrow-minded fundamentalists or so heavenly minded that they were no earthly good. Their resolve to endure the shaming slowly began to crack. The hairline fracture started when evangelicals discovered through ecumenical dialogue that liberals were surprisingly nice people. Cordial interaction in the university and denominations gave way to friendly relationships whose point of connection

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[4] See Joseph Bottum, *An Anxious Age: The Post-Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of America* (New York: Image Books, 2014).

[5] J. Gresham Machen, *Christianity and Liberalism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 16, 18.

[6] Walter Rauschenbusch, *A Theology for the Social Gospel* (New York: Macmillan Publishers, 2008), 20–21.

[7] Rauschenbusch, *A Theology for the Social Gospel*, 19.

[8] Walter Rauschenbusch, *Christianizing the Social Order* (Boston: The Pilgrim Press, 1912), 116.

[9] Rauschenbusch, *A Theology for the Social Gospel*, 141.

[10] Rauschenbusch, 135.

revolved around the rewarding camaraderie of "working together in unity for a kingdom cause." Liberal Christians proved to be quite likable. In fact, they were genuinely amicable and pleasant people with compassionate hearts for the urban poor. As a result, through a desire to protect harmony and work together, the hard edges of doctrine were smoothed down. Christianity was no longer a religion of truth grounded in God's unilateral promises; rather, it became more of an altruistic cause for community organizing built upon social solidarity that believed in creating something beautiful together for flourishing as God's children.

The identifiable infusion of Rauschenbusch's kingdom theology into the evangelical psyche came in 1910 at the World Missionary Conference at Edinburgh. The ecumenical priorities of this conference's organizers downplayed the inspiration and inerrancy of Scripture, the exclusivity of Christ, and maintained a highbrow tolerance to progressive Christianity and the blending of Christianity with other beliefs. The ecumenical discussions continued for decades as philanthropic alliances developed in the name of pursuing holistic and broader world evangelism. This latitudinarian approach to world evangelism lost its grip on the biblical gospel altogether. Evangelism morphed into declaring the value and worth of each person and helping them make sense of their deepest questions and needs in life. The church's mission became focused on the felt needs of society, showing people how to be part of God's mission to recreate culture, renew all things, and ultimately produce God's *shalom* throughout the world. This would happen once Christians learned to walk in the way of Christ so attractively that the world would join in God's mission of restoration. In this system, since everyone has been effectively reconciled to God already, the mission is to partner with God in inviting humanity to repair society's systemic brokenness and to flourish in their God-given inheritance. The mission was to restructure society around God's grandest dreams for humanity: justice, love, peace, and equity.[11]

Ecumenism Based on Causes and Friendships

Rauschenbusch's social transformationalist ideologues live on. Contemporary laptop-warriors and "artivists" organize and infiltrate Christian consciousness throughout seminaries, conferences, publishers, and most pervasively through social media. As thrilling as it might feel to be part of a movement-mindset, Christians must unite around truth, not causes. That dopamine rush from being part of the in-crowd of radical activists is an intoxicating drug that blinds the mind to reason, truth, and common sense. It is slavery to social liberationism through the means of awakening humanity to its divine spark, its sacred potential to flourish as the kingdom of God. Machen contended,

> The grace of God is rejected by modern liberalism. And the result is slavery—the slavery of the law, the wretched bondage by which man undertakes the impossible task of establishing his own righteousness as a ground of acceptance

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[11] For a discerning treatment of the development of the ecumenical world mission movement (i.e., the World Council of Churches) after 1910, see Arthur P. Johnston, *The Battle for Evangelism* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House, 1978).

with God. It may seem strange at first sight that "liberalism," of which the very name means freedom, should in reality be wretched slavery. But the phenomenon is not really so strange. Emancipation from the blessed will of God always involves bondage to some worse taskmaster.[12]

We must be careful not to use Christianity as a social organizing agenda. Christianity is fundamentally a doctrinal religion, not a cause to follow. The English philosopher, C. S. Lewis (1898–1963) warned in his book, *The Screwtape Letters*, that mission drift happens through slowly conflating the doctrines of Christianity for the blessings of Christianity's influence:

> On the other hand we do want, and want very much, to make men treat Christianity as a means; preferably, of course, as a means to their own advancement, but, failing that, as a means to anything—even to social justice. The thing to do is to get a man at first to value social justice as a thing which the Enemy demands, and then work him on to the stage at which he values Christianity because it may produce social justice. For the Enemy will not be used as a convenience. Men or nations who think they can revive the Faith in order to make a good society might just as well think they can use the stairs of Heaven as a short cut to the nearest chemist's shop…. "Believe this, not because it is true, but for some other reason." That's the game.[13]

In addition to viewing Christianity as a means for improving the temporal living conditions and overall human experience in society, an equally tenuous approach to Christianity exists—the temptation to view Christianity as so contextually flexible that it could include anyone who professes to love or follow Jesus. And the more erudite, cultured, and politically progressive the better. Instead of Christian fellowship grounded in the ancient gospel as the global church has historically confessed, cause-oriented solidarity and niceness are ends in themselves. The Welsh preacher of the 20th century, D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones (1899–1981) labeled this blind commitment to affinity a "false ecumenical tendency." Evangelicals were letting their guard down and partnering with self-professed Christians who had no clear biblical doctrine other than sentimental platitudes and religious "niceness." He cautioned:

> It is the danger of being so broad, so wide, and so loose that in the end we have no definitions at all. As I see things today, this is perhaps the greater danger because we are living in what is called an ecumenical age. People have reacted, and rightly, against the divisions in the past, these wrong and sinful divisions. But the danger is that you react so violently that you swing right to the other extreme and say that nothing matters except that we have a Christian spirit…. Certainly we must all believe in unity. Our Lord has established that once and for ever in His great high priestly prayer (John 17). It is everywhere in the New Testament. Our great endeavor should be to be one, yet this must not lead to a

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[12] Machen, *Christianity and Liberalism*, 121.
[13] C. S. Lewis, *The Screwtape Letters* (San Francisco: HarperOne, 2017), 126–27.

looseness in our thinking. We must not become subject to a false, vague, nebulous, ecumenical type of thinking.... I've met people who said... the Church of Scotland people and others whom we did not know and with whom we had nothing to do in the past, we've discovered they're very nice people, and we've had a very happy time working with them. This was very subtle, because they found that they were nice people—whether they had thought before that these people had horns and long tails I do not know—but the point was that they had been impressed by their niceness, by their friendliness, and by their brotherliness. This had the effect of making these people take the next step and say, Well, I wonder whether these doctrines we've been emphasizing are so important after all. Isn't the great thing about us that we are Christians, that we've got this loving spirit, and that we're prepared to work together?[14]

Excessive Contextualization[15]

This ecumenical tendency to defer noble motives to everyone, hope for the best, and admit that we have secret doubts about our faith often jettisons historical doctrine. And when that happens, where there are not objective and confessional moorings, all manner of hyper-contextualization presents itself as valid, innovative, and intriguing.

Often, from a non-native perspective (that of the missionary), the ability to discern intuitively when contextualization goes too far is quite complex. It is as complicated as learning a language fluently. Discerning excesses of contextualization is especially challenging if the missionary's primary operating standpoint is the target culture's perceived value system. Rather, the missionary's fundamental starting point should be rooted in theology, though not to the exclusion or denigration of the target culture. It is a matter of priority and focus. And to be honest, some missionaries falter by rarely acknowledging their own implicit existential approach to Scripture. This is usually evident in seasons of culture shock when the missionary seems to nitpick every disagreeable thing about the target culture. Yet others fail by arguing for understanding the Word through the target culture's standpoint and intersectional identities. It takes discernment and finesse to navigate between both ditches. Candidly admitting that we all have hidden perspectives is different than insisting on a standpoint filter that uniquely comprehends God and His gospel.

The missionary is truly tricultural—operating in the Bible's doctrinal value system, his own fallen native culture, and the fallen target culture. But to avoid inundating the target culture with his native culture and to prevent syncretism by blending biblical doctrine with the target culture, the missionary must be dominated by the Bible. His categories, priorities, and emphases must be doctrinally sound. He must hold the focused precision of a surgeon and the sober-minded calm of a sniper. This will help him know how to make the Bible's teaching understandable to the target people without deviation.

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[14] D. M. Lloyd-Jones, *What Is an Evangelical?* (Carlisle, PA: The Banner of Truth, 2002), 18–19.

[15] The rest of this article borrows some abbreviated and reorganized content from the author's work: E. D. Burns, *Ancient Gospel, Brave New World: Jesus Still Saves Sinners in Cultures of Shame, Fear, Bondage, and Weakness* (Cape Coral, FL: Founders, 2021), 103–35.

An Analogy

Consider this scenario: A Nigerian missionary, Chibundu, relocates to suburban Atlanta. Chibundu is sharing the gospel to middle-class youth in an after-school outreach. Querying their epistemological standpoint and their Generation Z value system, he discovers that they interpret truth and understand meaning through the prism of material pleasure, sexual expression, and self-esteem. Their impression of Christianity is that it is trite and boring. So, starting from their standpoint, Chibundu concludes that the good news for these young suburbanites is that Jesus can fulfill their material and sexual desires. He can help them accept themselves the way God made them, and he can show them how to have abundance (code for "fun") in life.[16] And assuming they have had minimal exposure to the basics of the gospel, Chibundu shares short "devos" to tell the story of the Bible. Using the Gen Z version of John 1:1—an actual and an irreverent publication—he quotes, "Since Day Uno there was Cap G. Big J was chillin' with Cap G. And Big J was Cap G."[17] And then he goes on to cite another distorted and blasphemous rendering of Ephesians 2:4–5, saying, "Cap G bein' the real one, took us zombies and high key gave the real game."[18] Guess what? This kind of contextual "gospel" connects to the youth in a way that he perceives is inoffensive, culturally relevant, and enthusiastically embraced. He writes to his supporters in Africa and says, "I found a culturally relevant way to contextualize the gospel for the Gen Z people group."

Now, this illustration is obviously ridiculous and insipid. Intuitively, when the roles are reversed and traditional missionary-sending nations receive Majority World missionaries who employ the West's hyper-contextualization techniques, we then realize this standpoint approach is untenable. Anyone with a basic grasp of Scripture knows that the gospel is so much more than meeting felt needs of someone's standpoint. However, this culturally maximizing style of contextualization is not too dissimilar to what Western missionaries do when they prioritize interpreting Scripture mainly from the standpoint of the target cultural value system.

This type of prioritizing-culture-first approach is a gateway for future Christian cults and proves more difficult to penetrate with the true gospel. It might seem culturally relevant, expedient, and effective to the missionary. But it can produce devastating results of syncretism, sects, and utter confusion. One of the best ways to create a resistant unreached people group is to inoculate them with enough "Jesus" so that they presume they are "followers of Jesus." They fail to know, assent, and trust in the Christ of the Bible as the Spirit has revealed Him throughout the ages. When missionaries fail to define terms biblically and doctrinally and instead ask questions of cultural priority, counterfeit gospels proliferate.

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[16] While hypothetical, this illustration reflects reality, as is evidenced by the work of a pro-same-sex author arguing that Scripture affirms same-sex relationships. See Matthew Vines, *God and the Gay Christian: The Biblical Case in Support of Same-Sex Relationships* (New York: Convergent Books, 2014). For a biblical perspective on sexuality, see John D. Street, *Passions of the Heart: Biblical Counsel for Stubborn Sexual Sins* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R, 2019).

[17] See Sunday Cool, *The Word According to Gen Z: A 30-Day Devo Challenge* (Nashville: LifeWay, 2020), 8, 36. See also "Gen Z Bible Translation (part 2)," Sunday Cool Tees, September 25, 2019, YouTube, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_QOLQ758uLo.

[18] Cool, *The Word According to Gen Z*, 8, 36.

Risk of Contextualization: Intersectional Gnosticism

As illustrated above, some missionary practitioners and missiologists have overemphasized interpreting Scripture through the contextual standpoint of the target culture. Interpretive errors have slipped in unnoticed through discussions of "the [fill-in-the-modifier] gospel": the African gospel, the Western gospel, the shame/honor gospel, the Chinese gospel, the Global South gospel, the Indian gospel, and so on. To be clear, this assessment does not mean that Scripture should never specially apply and minister to people of diverse ethnolinguistic backgrounds, generations, and cultures. One ethnolinguistic group might respond with contemplative reverence to gospel truths, while another group might receive the gospel with celebration and dancing. Where a Scandinavian church might recite the Apostles' Creed with solemnity, a Ghanaian church might sing it with tambourines and exuberance. Biblical promises of God's justice impact a marginalized people enduring ruthless genocide differently than an upper-class student in a Western university. The former prioritizes verses of judgment and imprecation, while the latter emphasizes ideas of social responsibility and fairness. Both emphasize God's impartiality and justice, but their unique perspectives steer their applications of it.

To be fair and candid, the challenge with big-hearted missionaries is that they often use common terminology they hear in soundbites and on social media. I have embarrassingly made this mistake in using some secular-originated terminology, only later to find out that its technical meaning was antibiblical and far from what I was intending. I initially assume this is also the case when I hear missionaries undiscerningly parrot faddish jargon. It is not uncommon to hear a missiologist talk about the "intersections" of theology and culture or the like. Usually, that is just a trendy way of saying "the ways theology addresses commonly held ideas and the ways major cultural value systems influence the theological questions we ask." But the fact is, words have meaning, and ideas have consequences.

We must define terms, say what we mean, and mean what we say. The more missionaries and missiologists undiscerningly borrow verbiage from social sciences, the more the world's insidious hidden meanings have purchase power over our thinking. The evangelical fascination with "plundering the Egyptians" and discovering God's common-grace truth in the secular social sciences too easily leads to mission drift. And that leads to gospel drift. This is all done, with genuine intentions, to be sure, in the name of "ecumenical dialogue," "cultural sensitivity," and "relevant contextualization."

Standpoint Theory and Intersectional Gnosticism

In attempting to liberate biblical interpretation from the perceived colonization of Western interpretation, some missiologists employ a reader-centric hermeneutic (which, ironically, is thoroughly Western). It asks what the text fundamentally means to readers according to their cultural value system and orientation. Yet, frankly, this actually tends to exceed postmodernism. A "post-proposition" approach or a "post-truth" approach are more accurate descriptions. Inadvertently, the missionary dons a theological paternalism and becomes, as it were, a new priest who decides what ideas and doctrines the disadvantaged culture can understand. This approach effortlessly

slips into *standpoint epistemology* (or *standpoint theory*), illustrated by the anecdote about the Nigerian missionary.[19] This approach argues that knowledge emerges from a social and experiential position. Though few evangelical theologians and missiologists push contextual theology this far, it is an inevitable trajectory.[20]

Standpoint theory has roots in critical theory (academic jargon for *cultural Marxism*), Marxist theory, and the Hegelian dialectic.[21] It is an epistemological tool for understanding and interpreting truth from the standpoint of a marginalized minority's "lived experience," in conflict with an oppressive majority. And white Euro-American heterosexual male biblical interpretation has overshadowed historical theology and missiology. So some seek to interpret the Bible from a diverse standpoint because, they contend, marginalized minorities understand truth, not just differently but even more accurately. Truth is contextually situated, and every intersection of a marginalized component (e.g., non-white, non-male, non-sexually binary, Majority World) adds a uniquely authoritative epistemological tool for approximating truth. This secret spiritual knowledge based on a marginalized status is a form of what I call, "intersectional gnosticism."[22] Essentially, this says that an unmediated, intuitive spiritual knowledge exists based on one's oppressed, marginalized, or minority experience that separates the "haves" from the "have nots." Though not the same, it has a similar spirit to the Galatian heresy, which suggested that particular ethnicities must receive the Jews' teachings and submit to their laws because they had special knowledge based on their standpoint. Even with the most genuine intentions, this is still a false gospel because it abandons the freeness of grace (Gal 1:6–11). Again, without ambiguity, it is a false gospel.

Intersectional gnosticism, when applied to Scriptural interpretation, suggests that Jesus was an oppressed minority and came to liberate poor people. Therefore, hermeneutical and doctrinal priorities of privileged Christians from oppressor classes—affluent white Euro-American biological males—are fundamentally deficient in their biblical and theological conclusions.[23] To be fair, some would not make such a generalized claim, but they would acknowledge that much doctrinal systematization comes from the pens of imperfect white Euro-American males who have had their own cultural and generational blind spots (which, of course, we all have).

Nevertheless, increasingly loud voices contend that such doctrines from privileged white males are inherently oppressive, enforcing a colonialist and white-supremacist rule upon the poor and marginalized Christians of the Majority World. And the more intersections of supposed minority status exist in an individual, the

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[19] This anecdote about the suburban youth group in Atlanta is admittedly imperfect because true standpoint theory focuses primarily on the oppressed. It merely illustrates the faulty principles of standpoint-oriented contextualization.

[20] For an original source promoting standpoint theory, specifically indigenous standpoint theory, see Martin Nakata, *Disciplining the Savages: Savaging the Disciplines* (Canberra: Aboriginal Studies, 2007).

[21] For a brief analysis of the effects of the Hegelian dialectic, see Burns, *Ancient Gospel, Brave New World*, 159–60.

[22] In 1989, "intersectionality" was initially a method to blend postmodern theory with political activism to analyze and change society. It became synonymous with cultural Marxism. See Kimberlé Crenshaw, "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color," *Stanford Law Review* 43, no. 6 (July 1991): 1241–99.

[23] For examples, see James H. Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2010), 53, 66–67.

more that person claims an authoritative interpretation of Scripture. This tendency generally exhibits a form of ethnic epistemology that claims only those who share one's ethnicity can know truth for that particular ethnic group. Essentially, this abrogates anyone else's truth claims that are of a diverse or majority group.[24]

Background: Christianized Deconstructionism, Post-Colonialism, and Missions

This culturally situated standpoint approach to knowing contextual "truth" is a consequence of the post-1960s' "long march through the institutions."[25] The French postmodern philosopher Jacques Derrida (1930–2004) strongly opposed transcendent truth. Derrida despised what he called the Christian tradition's "totalitarian forms of knowledge … a tyrannical desire to produce final Truths … for what is universal and certain."[26] So, to gut transcendence from the Christian tradition's consciousness, Derrida created a new way of finding contextual truth called "deconstruction." Each cultural standpoint and social/experiential position could determine its own truth based on its own inherent constructs: "Deconstruction reveals that a given Truth is not transcendent, that it is dependent upon other small-t truths, and that it is culturally constrained."[27] Critical race theorists Richard Delgado and Jean Stefancic admit that critical race theory bears a similarity to socially constructed truth when they state, "For the critical race theorist, objective truth, like merit, does not exist, at least in social science and politics. In these realms, truth is a social construct created to suit the purposes of the dominant group."[28]

In terms of destabilizing these dominant narratives of objectivity, because of unfulfilled "utopian dreams of a socialist revolution," critical theorists argue that the twenty-first century "social-democratic struggle" has focused on "concepts of hegemony" wherein "dominant groups manipulate symbols and images to construct 'common sense' and thereby maintain their power."[29] They boast that "critical analysis of hegemony aims to expose and deconstruct … 'common sense.'"[30] According to cultural Marxism's critical theory, feelings and experiences are

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[24] For a penetrating essay on "ethnic gnosticism," see Voddie Baucham, "Ethnic Gnosticism," in *By What Standard? God's World … God's Rules*, ed. Jared Longshore (Cape Coral, FL: Founders, 2020), 105–16.

[25] Herbert Marcuse, *Counterrevolution and Revolt* (Boston: Beacon, 1972), 55. Herbert Marcuse (1898–1979) was a German-American philosopher of the Frankfurt School of Critical Theory. In his famously influential essay among Leftists and woke activists, Marcuse argued that the Right must be destroyed through whatever means necessary in order to liberate the Left. Marcuse, "Repressive Tolerance," in *Political Elites in a Democracy*, ed. Peter Bachrach (New York: Routledge, 2017), 158.

[26] Quoted in Riki Wilchins, *Queer Theory, Gender Theory: An Instant Primer* (Bronx, NY: Riverdale Avenue Books, 2014), 48.

[27] Quoted in Wilchins, *Queer Theory, Gender Theory: An Instant Primer*, 50.

[28] Richard Delgado and Jean Stefancic, *Critical Race Theory: An Introduction*, 2nd ed. (New York: NYU Press, 2012), 104.

[29] Jacob P. K. Gross, "Education and Hegemony: The Influence of Antonio Gramsci," in Bradley A. U. Levinson, ed., *Beyond Critique: Exploring Critical Social Theories and Education,* 1st ed. (New York: Routledge, 2011), 65.

[30] Gross, "Education and Hegemony," 65.

supreme over objective truths and principles.[31] Similarly, critical theorists Robin DiAngelo and Özlem Sensoy employ a critical pedagogy to awaken (and be woke) to what is called a "critical consciousness."[32] They argue that claims of objective, transcendent truth are socially unjust: "A key element of social injustice involves the claim that particular knowledge is objective, neutral, and universal."[33] They explain that "critical theory calls into question the idea that objectivity is desirable or even *possible*."[34] DiAngelo and Sensoy go on to make clear that "knowledge is socially constructed…. We mean that knowledge is reflective of the values and interests of those who produce it. This term captures the understanding that all content and all means of knowing are connected to a social context."[35] So, they show how "positionality" becomes "a key tool in analyzing knowledge construction. Positionality asserts that knowledge depends upon a complex web of cultural values, beliefs, experiences, and social positions."[36]

The Left has increasingly viewed deconstructing the meaning of language and recreating meaning (using the same or newly reimagined words with bizarre uses that don't connect to "common sense") as a tool for subverting transcendent meaning, obscuring objectivity, and demoralizing and manipulating people. Language is mainly useful to catalyze operational change for social outcomes—a linguistic alchemy. It does not reflect a timeless universal order. Language speaks into being new potentialities of self-creation.

For a famous example of the consequence of language deception, let's take the Jewish lesbian philosopher Judith Butler. Butler famously sabotaged the meaning of the created order of maleness and femaleness by castigating the Judeo-Christian roots of structured language and ideas as oppressive "regimes of power."[37] Using language like *man* and *woman* supposedly oppresses people into submission to the dominant patriarchal Christian worldview. Hence, to liberate people from their mental, emotional, and social slavery to objective language power structures, all terms must be questioned, subverted, and reimagined. Butler contends that there is no "universal basis for feminism, one which must be found in an identity assumed to exist cross-culturally."[38] In other words, there is no objective transcultural and transgenerational

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[31] "We must free ourselves from … this ideology [of objective truths]. We must learn to trust our own senses, feelings, and experiences, and to give them authority, even (or especially) in the face of dominant accounts of social reality that claim universality." Charles R. Lawrence III, "The Word and the River: Pedagogy as Scholarship as Struggle," in *Critical Race Theory*, ed. Kimberlé Crenshaw, Neil Gotanda, Gary Peller, and Kendall Thomas (New York: The New Press, 1995), 338.

[32] According to Frankfurt School philosopher and sociologist Max Horkheimer (1895–1973), critical theory seeks to liberate "men and all their potentialities" from the dominant traditions and enslaving ideas of oppressive ideologies. "Its goal is man's emancipation from slavery." Max Horkheimer, *Critical Theory: Selected Essays*, trans. Matthew J. O'Connell (New York: The Continuum, 2002), 245–46. Critical consciousness is where people become aware (or woke) of their positionality in the world and the world's power structures that shape its dominant version of reality.

[33] Robin DiAngelo and Özlem Sensoy, *Is Everyone Really Equal? An Introduction to Key Concepts in Social Justice Education*, Multicultural Education Series, ed. James A. Banks, 2nd ed. (New York: Teachers College Press, 2017), 29.

[34] DiAngelo and Sensoy, *Is Everyone Really Equal?*, 29 (emphasis original).

[35] DiAngelo and Sensoy, 29.

[36] DiAngelo and Sensoy, 29.

[37] Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 1st ed. (New York: Routledge, 2006), xxxii, 5, 9.

[38] Butler, xxxii, 5, 9.

meaning to the most fundamental binaries of creation—maleness and femaleness. Rather, this self-proclaimed gender that is "independent of [biological] sex … becomes a free-floating artifice."[39] She argues that words create new meaning. And by repeating new words and new meanings, just as God spoke all things into being, this subverts oppressive language regimes. We can then install our own regimes of reimagined language. English philosopher Roger Scruton (1944–2020) pungently remarked that "the nonsense machine began to crank out its impenetrable sentences, of which nothing could be understood" and "it looked as though Nothing had at last found its voice."[40]

The Emergence of Post-Colonialism

This notion of deconstruction noticeably entered the Christian consciousness first through professor of religion John Caputo in 1987 in his book on deconstruction in hermeneutics. Caputo continued to push his ideas into Christian discourse through *The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida* and *What Would Jesus Deconstruct?*, with a foreword from Brian McLaren, a foundational influencer in the emergent church movement of the 1990s and early 2000s. McLaren and Caputo both labored to deconstruct Christianity, McLaren famously in his *The Secret Message of Jesus*.[41] Their deconstruction approach questioned truth and blurred meaning. Caputo also served as the doctoral supervisor for the popular Christian philosopher James K. A. Smith, who mainstreamed many postmodern ideas into Christian thought. Smith contends that the philosophies of French postmodernists like Derrida and Foucault share similar claims with Christianity's central doctrines. He warns Christians against claiming objective truth and shows how to embrace the best of postmodern deconstructionism:

> To assert that our interpretation is not an interpretation but objectively true often translates into the worst kinds of imperial and colonial agendas…. But our confidence rests not on objectivity but rather on the convictional power of the Holy Spirit (which isn't exactly objective)…. Deconstruction's recognition that everything is interpretation opens a space of questioning—a space to call into question the received and dominant interpretations that often claim not to be interpretations at all. As such, deconstruction is interested in interpretations that have been marginalized and sidelined, activating voices that have been silenced. This is the constructive, yea prophetic, aspect of Derrida's deconstruction: a concern for justice by being concerned about dominant, status quo interpretations that silence those who see differently. Thus, from its inception, deconstruction

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[39] Butler, *Gender Trouble*, xxxii, 5, 9.

[40] Roger Scruton, *Fools, Frauds and Firebrands: Thinkers of the New Left* (London: Bloomsbury Continuum, 2019), 16.

[41] John D. Caputo, *Radical Hermeneutics: Repetition, Deconstruction, and the Hermeneutic Project* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1987); idem, *The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida: Religion without Religion* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1997); idem, *What Would Jesus Deconstruct?: The Good News of Postmodernism for the Church*, The Church and Postmodern Culture (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007); Brian D. McLaren, *The Secret Message of Jesus: Uncovering the Truth that Could Change Everything* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2007).

has been, at root, ethical—concerned for the paradigmatic marginalized described by the Old Testament as "the widow, the orphan, and the stranger."[42]

Eventually, under the charge of McLaren, the emergent church's focus shifted away from deconstructing meaning to an ideology of confronting "power." This ideology is called *post-colonial theory*, concocted by the French philosopher Michel Foucault (1926–1984).[43] This shift meant that the colleagues and followers of McLaren attacked traditional Christian truth because it is essentially a disguised power play to control people. They view the history of Western Christianity as littered with crusades and colonialism.[44] And McLaren indicates that deconstructionism led him to post-colonial theory because, as he questioned the meaning of language and biblical truth, McLaren questioned the "colonial bias" and an "imperial" and "dominating mindset inherent to Christian faith."[45] He saw that "Metanarratives weren't simply big stories—they were the stories that fueled colonialism."[46] He suggests that to save the authentic Christian faith from its history of oppressive theological constructs, we need to reimagine the faith with new "diverse adjectives, … modifiers like emergent Christianity, big tent Christianity, missional Christianity, not to mention feminist, eco-, Latin American, black."[47] And in deconstructionist fashion, he prefers to make thinly veiled attacks on truth claims through evasive and open-ended questions over against clear propositional statements. For example, he posits,

> Unmodified theology is accepted as Christian theology, or orthodox theology, or important, normal, basic, real, historic theology. But what if we tried to subvert this deception? What if we started calling standard, unmodified theology chauvinist theology, or white theology, or consumerist or colonial or Greco-Roman theology? … Could it be that the faith that has been rejected in Europe is not the essential and original Christian faith, but rather the colonial Christian faith—the chauvinistic, Greco-Roman, consumerist, white-man's Christian faith?[48]

But to ensure that he clearly communicates his newfound deconstructive focus, McLaren argues, in a rare blunt claim, "Standard, normative, historic, so-called orthodox Christian theology has been a theology of empire, a theology of

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[42] James K. A. Smith, *Who's Afraid of Postmodernism?: Taking Derrida, Lyotard, and Foucalt to Church*, The Church and Postmodern Culture (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006), 51. Smith, in his interesting and creative style, goes on to outline what he practically suggests for a "deconstructive church" and a "storytelling church"; Smith, *Who's Afraid of Postmodernism?* 57–58, 76–80.

[43] For an introduction to the basics of Foucault's ideology, see Michel Foucault, *The Foucault Reader*, ed. Paul Rabinow (New York: Pantheon, 1984).

[44] For one of the first "evangelical" attempts at mainstreaming post-colonialism, see Kay Higuera Smith, Jayachitra Lalitha, and L. Daniel Hawk, ed., *Evangelical Postcolonial Conversations: Awakenings in Theology and Praxis* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2014); see also Randy S. Woodley, Bo C. Sanders, and Grace Ji-Sun Kim, *Decolonizing Evangelicalism: An 11:59 p.m. Conversation*, New Covenant Commentary Series (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2020).

[45] Brian D. McLaren, "Post-Colonial Theology," *Sojourners*, September 15, 2010, https://sojo.net/articles/post-colonial-theology.

[46] McLaren, "Post-Colonial Theology."

[47] McLaren, "Post-Colonial Theology."

[48] McLaren, "Post-Colonial Theology."

colonialism, a theology that powerful people used as a tool to achieve and defend land theft, exploitation, domination, superiority, and privilege."[49] In similar fashion, Minneapolis-based activist and spiritual director Mark Van Steenwyk moved from deconstructing truth to decolonizing Christianity. Referring to America, he argues,

> Let us take the ax to the root. Our nation's Christian roots aren't incidental to our imperialism; they are central…. This Christian supremacy has been the justification for the deepest of our national sins. If we want to confound and disrupt the narratives of oppression, we need to raise our angry voices in the pews as well as the streets. I don't mean that figuratively…. I literally mean we should disrupt our churches.[50]

Therefore, according to deconstructionists, the way to discover the hidden meaning of Christianity is to deconstruct language, question meaning, reimagine truth statements, and reinterpret meaning through non-powerful standpoints. This is done to the degree that authentic Christianity is "liberated" from its historic intellectual colonization of Greco-Roman, Western European, individualistic, guilt-oriented, salvation-oriented constructs. These new standpoint approaches take on new modifiers, each one claiming its own truth claims and metanarratives against the oppressive backdrop of classic Christian gospel doctrines. Adopting and retaining the ancient faith and historic doctrines would entail succumbing to a theological colonization of the marginalized mind. And standing with the faith passed down through the ages, without modifying it, would mean joining the oppressors and the corrupt system that the true message of Jesus seeks to deconstruct.

Many missionary practitioners are completely naive to the activistic intensity behind this growing post-colonial movement. These standpoint and post-colonial theories are serious threats to historic Christian doctrine and missions. They are not merely diverse perspectives we can ignore. Their purveyors are passionate activists intent on breaking down classic Christian doctrine and its influences to recreate a Christianity of their own imagination. The positionality of the oppressor's knowledge (historical Christian doctrine and transcendent truths), they would contend, must suffer conflict with the socially constructed knowledge of the oppressed (non-Western perspectives and value systems) in order to create new knowledge (historically marginalized perspectives that are morally superior).[51]

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[49] McLaren, "Post-Colonial Theology," *Sojourners*, September 15, 2010, https://sojo.net/articles/post-colonial-theology.

[50] Mark Van Steenwyk, "Take the Politics of Disruption to Church," *Sojourners*, February 21, 2017, https://sojo.net/articles/take-politics-disruption-church.

[51] This is an example of the Hegelian Dialectic, which posits that social systems and society change by standard majority positions undergoing attack from opposing minority positions in order to blend the two and create a new position: Thesis + Antithesis = Synthesis (New Thesis).

Foreground: Leftist Liberalism in Missions

Christian philosopher and theologian J. P. Moreland indicates that Christian discourse is up against the confluence of two aggressively opposing worldviews: naturalism and postmodernism. And so, to maintain respect from the academy, Christian discourse slips into parroting politically correct language, taking on a form of theological revisionism. He explains,

> It seems that more and more theologians and biblical scholars are revising the biblical text or Christian doctrine at just a time when it becomes politically correct to do so. These revisions usually abandon what the church has taught and believed for many centuries in favor of a new view that virtually no one has held in church history but which is extremely popular among secular intellectuals and elites. [52]

Ethicist and theologian Gary Dorrien helpfully shows how this echoes old-fashioned liberal theology's "creative intellectual response" to the liberal pursuit of "a progressive Christian 'third way' between the authority-based orthodoxies of traditional Christianity and the spiritless materialism of modern atheism or deism."[53] Dorrien explains:

> The idea of liberal theology is nearly three centuries old. In essence, it is the idea that Christian theology can be genuinely Christian without being based upon external authority. Since the eighteenth century, liberal Christian thinkers have argued that religion should be modern and progressive and that the meaning of Christianity should be interpreted from the standpoint of modern knowledge and experience.[54]

The liberal rush to deconstruct external authority and reinterpret Scripture from dynamic experiential standpoints is emphatically modern. It is not pre-Hellenic, pre-Western, and pre-colonialist as some opine:

> Before the modern period, all Christian theologies were constructed within a house of authority. All premodern Christian theologies made claims to authority-based orthodoxy. Even the mystical and mythopoetic theologies produced by premodern Christianity took for granted the view of scripture as an infallible revelation and the view of theology as an explication of propositional revelation.[55]

Now, we must ask, other than historically understanding how deconstruction and post-colonial theory made inroads into Christian hermeneutics and missions, why

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[52] J. P. Moreland, "How Christian Philosophers Can Serve Systematic Theologians and Biblical Scholars," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 63, no. 2 (2020): 304–305. Moreland gives examples of such revisionism, one being the "acceptance of Neo-Marxist views of social justice, white privilege, and diversity." Moreland, "How Philosophers Can Serve," 305.

[53] Gary Dorrien, *The Making of American Liberal Theology: Imagining Progressive Religion, 1805–1900* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2001), xiii–xiv, xv.

[54] Dorrien, *American Liberal Theology*, xiii–xiv, xv.

[55] Dorrien, xiii–xiv, xv.

does this really matter? This push toward decolonizing theology, with all its humane emergent-esque packaging, will prove to be an unmitigated threat to the future of missions. Christian missionaries who propagate a salvation-oriented gospel over against a social transformative gospel no longer seem merely intolerant and arrogant. Those were the days of relativism. Salvation-preaching missionaries are now unsafe, hateful, and racist.

Anti-White and Anti-Missionary Activists

Increasingly, more vocal influencers use fearmongering terms like *racist*, *white supremacist*, and *colonialist* to deride gospel-preaching missionaries and even endanger their visa platforms, financial support, reputation, and overall security. And the combination of social media, cancel culture, and mob mentality could potentially ruin a missionary's life and endanger his family within twenty-four hours. We cannot win over anti-missionary activists with our winsome attitude and groveling anti-white penance.

In discussing the use of common terms like *white* and *privilege*, missionaries must be careful to explain what they mean and do not mean. The world has its own definitions. For instance, associate professor of systematic theology and African studies at Yale University, Willie James Jennings, argues thus about whiteness and Christianity: "Whiteness as a way of being in the world has been parasitically joined to a Christianity that is also a way of being in the world."[56] He goes on to claim that the "fusion of whiteness and Christianity" has led to racism, sexism, patriarchy, planetary exploitation, and nationalism.[57] And then he defines what he means and doesn't mean by *whiteness*: "To speak of whiteness is not to speak of particular people but of people caught up in a deformed building project aimed at bringing the world to its full maturity…. Whiteness is a horrific answer to this question [of maturity] formed exactly at the site of Christian missions."[58]

Feminist and activist Andrea Smith further illustrates in *Can "White" People Be Saved?* how anti-conversionist the scholars are who conflate whiteness with missions. Without careful qualification, Smith comprehensively condemns the history of missionary work among Native Americans in the United States because it "has been simultaneously the history of Indigenous genocide. This is true because the goal of missionization of Indigenous people was not their salvation."[59]

Because the history of missions is condemned alongside colonization and white supremacy, even among those missionaries whose skin's melanin and passport country do not fit the narrative (Majority World missionaries), they could still likely be charged with white supremacy. How is that possible? Because *whiteness*, *white supremacy*, and *white privilege* are social constructs that suggest "oppression," "oppressor," and "cultural imperialism." And Christianity is downstream of an

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[56] Willie James Jennings, "Can White People Be Saved? Reflections on the Relationship of Missions and Whiteness," in Love L. Sechrest, Johnny Ramírez-Johnson, and Amos Yong, ed., *Can "White" People Be Saved?: Triangulating Race, Theology, and Mission*, Missiological Engagements (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2018), 27–28, 43.

[57] Jennings, "Can White People Be Saved?," 27–28, 43.

[58] Jennings, 27–28, 43.

[59] Andrea Smith, "Decolonizing Salvation," in Sechrest, et al, *Can "White" People Be Saved?*, 44.

oppressive Euro-centric white colonialist culture. Therefore, "Christian privilege" is not indicative of gospel blessings to be generously shared but, rather, such privilege is a tyrannical cultural hegemony to be subverted and destroyed. I have seen cases where non-white ministers and evangelists suffer derision for spreading the oppressive colonialist systems of whiteness. They are accused of inflicting psychological and theological oppression.

To illustrate these concerns, Eliza Griswold, in a 2020 article from *The New Yorker*, demonstrates how some church leaders have impugned all things "white" in Christian tradition and history. Highlighting Christian leader and organizer, Michelle Higgins, Griswold quotes her relaying comments that she made in December 2015 at the famous Urbana Student Missions Conference: "Mission work was really an exercise in exporting racism, and that evangelicalism was a moral protection for white supremacy."[60] Griswold goes on to quote from Lisa Sharon Harper, the founder of Freedom Road, a progressive evangelical group: "For the next five hundred years [of Christianity], the principle effort will be decolonization."[61]

These examples from Christian activists are indicative of the gospel drift and mission drift that has been part of the evangelical missions community for multiple decades. For example, in his book *How to Be an Antiracist*, professor of race and discriminatory policy Ibram X. Kendi describes when his parents attended InterVarsity's Urbana '70 where evangelist Tom Skinner (1942–1994), was preaching. They recall Skinner describing Jesus as a "radical revolutionary" through "a new reading of the gospel."[62] He declared, "Any gospel that does not … speak to the issue of enslavement, injustice, [and] inequality … is not the gospel."[63] Kendi goes on to remark, "They were saved into Black liberation theology and joined the churchless church of the Black Power movement…. They stopped thinking about saving Black people and started thinking about liberating Black people."[64]

Let that last statement sink in. Is that not tragic? Analogically speaking, in what ethical universe would a physician mainly seek to liberate HIV-infected Africans from the social effects of European colonization when all the while he has unlimited access to a free cure for the HIV virus but doesn't want to use it because he received it from European medical scientists? That would be medical malpractice of the highest order and a crime against humanity. Why do we tolerate less for those who claim to be physicians of the soul?

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[60] Kevin Porter, "Michelle Higgins Challenges Evangelical Church on #BlackLivesMatter at Urbana 15," *The Christian Post*, December 31, 2015, https://www.christianpost.com/news/black-lives-matter-ubana-15-michelle-higgins-challenges-evangelical-church.html.

[61] Eliza Griswold, "How Black Lives Matter is Changing the Church," *The New Yorker*, August 30, 2020, https://www.newyorker.com/news/on-religion/how-black-lives-matter-is-changing-the-church.

[62] Ibram X. Kendi, *How to Be an Antiracist* (New York: Random House), 15–16.

[63] Kendi, How to Be an Antiracist, 15–16.

[64] Kendi, 15–16. Consider James Cone's (1938–2018)—the father of black liberation theology—explication of salvation according to Black liberation theology and his influence on influencers like Tom Skinner and Ibram Kendi: Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation*, 135–36.

Caring Especially for Eternal Suffering

Indeed, Christians should have compassion for all suffering but *especially* everlasting suffering. It is not a matter of either/or. However, it is also not a matter of both/and, since they are not of equal magnitude. The differences between temporally *immediate* needs and eternally *important* needs are incalculable. Certainly, we should care enough to help distressed people, but we must care most for those speeding blindly into eternal torment. Evangelical outreach that fails to prioritize the eternal over the temporal will lose the *evangel* altogether. Consider this simple and poignant observation by pastor and theologian S. Lewis Johnson (1915–2004):

> Since the great truth of justification by faith alone is at the heart of Paul's letter to the Roman church, the epistle may come as something of a surprise to modern ecclesiastics. We might have expected the apostle to address believers at Rome, a city crammed with social problems, with a social manifesto or, at the least, a recitation of the primary truths of Christianity in their application to the social problems of the imperial city. Rome was a city of slaves, but Paul did not preach against slavery. It was a city of lust and vice, but he did not aim his mightiest guns at these evils. It was a city of gross economic injustice, but he did not thrust the sword of the Spirit into the vitals of that plague…. Paul did not think that social reform in Rome was "an evangelical imperative." The proclamation of the gospel of Jesus Christ solved the crucial and urgent need for the society as a whole and for people in particular. It is still the imperative of the Christian church, and the Christian church will advance only to the extent that its gospel advances.[65]

Conclusion

The history of modern missions records many big-hearted missionaries who lose their resolve to keep contending for biblical truth and grow weary in waiting for the future promises of God. The seeming innocence of ecumenical friendships threatens to shipwreck their faith. They find that hyper-contextualized models of communicating the least-common denominator of the Christian faith is preferable to the perceived imperialistic bigotry of proclaiming the historic faith.

As Christians increasingly push back against the threat of cultural Marxism embedded in critical theory language, the verbiage will likely rebrand, but the ideas will remain the same. It is a moneymaker and a power grab for too many billionaire-activists, globalist-technocrats, and cultural elites to just cast aside. This is a long-term battle for language, meaning, and ideas—and lest we forget, these ideas have eternal consequences. Eternal hell and heaven are on the line. We must view it as a

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[65] S. Lewis Johnson, *Discovering Romans: Spiritual Revival for the Soul*, ed. Mike Abendroth (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Academic, 2014), 25. In quoting "an evangelical imperative," Johnson was referencing Claude Thompson, "Social Reform: An Evangelical Imperative," *Christianity Today* (March 26, 1971), 8–12. In his footnote, Johnson argued, "Now no one, not even the most obtuse Bible-beating, Bible-Belt fundamentalist, will take the position that the teaching of Scripture does not involve the Christian ultimately in social vision and action. But the real issue is one of degree. The primary thrust of the Scriptures is toward the evangelical issue, not the social questions…. Such evangelism will produce social action and change."

modern ideological religion that has declared war with classic Christianity. Dutch theologian Herman Bavinck (1854–1921) lays out the inevitability of a long truth war with the spirit of the modern age:

> If we understand Christianity's warrant and maintain a desire to preserve her essence, then we can do nothing else but take a resolute position against the systems of the day and the worldviews of its own invention and fashioning. There can be no question of mediation. There can be no thought of reconciliation. The times are too grave to flirt with the spirit of the age. The deep, sharp contrast standing between the Christian faith and the modern person must provide us with the insights that picking portions of each is not possible and that deciding between alternatives is a duty. However lovely peace would be, the conflict is upon us.[66]

Truly, the conflict is upon us. There is no third way. Cultural Marxism is not a neutral construct that Christians can nicely tolerate and eventually redeem. This is not a matter of chewing the ecumenical meat and spitting out the bones; in this case, the meat is poisoned. Consider what the godfather of cultural Marxism, Antonio Gramsci (1891–1937), contended: "Socialism is precisely the religion that must overwhelm Christianity…. In the new order, Socialism will triumph by first capturing the culture via infiltration of schools, universities, churches, and the media by transforming the consciousness of society."[67]

As Christians rush to "plunder the Egyptians" and seek out those points of commonality in culture, a naïve ecumenism permeates the evangelical mind. When we hear Christians encourage things like interpreting Scripture from the "standpoint" of another culture, "deconstructing" and "decolonizing" theology to make room for diverse voices, promoting "social justice," or repenting of "white supremacy," we must query what they are suggesting. This is merely political activistic language disguised as a theological movement to influence Christian institutions. They might know enough about cultural Marxism's critical theory to know it is bad, but they are nonetheless parroting its language. They have probably merely observed other influential Christians use trending terminology, but they do not take the time to read and examine the original sources. When novel worldly terminology infiltrates Christian discourse, if it does not have a historical precedent with a common definition, Christians must seek definitions. We should ask, "What do you mean? How do you know that's true? What does the Bible say?"

The activist-impulse of evangelicalism often uncritically adopts the culture's language in order to be a "brave prophetic voice" and to "be a blessing" to the culture, insisting that "social transformation" is "an evangelical imperative." But if we would mainly use biblical terms and precise historic doctrines, we would not need to borrow worldly concepts, since words have meaning and ideas have consequences. And bad

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[66] Herman Bavinck, *Christian Worldview*, trans. N. Gray Sutanto, James Eglinton, and Cory C. Brock (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2019), 27.

[67] Quoted by Roger Kiska, "Antonio Gramsci's Long March through History," *Religion & Liberty*, Acton Institute, 29 No. 3 (December 12, 2019), https://www.acton.org/religion-liberty/volume-29-number-3/antonio-gramscis-long-march-through-history.

theological ideas have eternal victims. If we start borrowing worldly terms, we will inevitably start thinking worldly thoughts, even if that was not the original intention. Moreover, we must beware of the serpent-like tendency of some to use biblical terminology with newly innovated meanings—a contextually dynamic "living constitutionalism," as it were. Using worldly constructs to solve societal problems without a heavenly gospel of personal salvation in Jesus Christ is the story of human history. It is Babel's legacy. Bad ideas have bad consequences. And if history has taught us anything, some bad ideas come with body bags.

To be sure, any twenty-first-century missionary, regardless of their nationality and complexion, who is courageous enough to proclaim the ancient gospel of salvation in Christ through faith and repentance will find themselves marginalized. They will be a hated and vilified minority. This is exactly the way the post-colonialist ideological system works. Conversionist Christianity is deemed imperialistic. And it thus requires deconstruction, subversion, and eventual destruction of the salvation-oriented missionary *ethos*. This is no surprise when it comes from the world, but it will be heartbreaking when it comes from friends and those who call themselves "brothers." Get ready. Know the truth. Rest in Christ. Paul's exhortation is apropos: "Be watchful, stand firm in the faith, act like men, be strong. Let all that you do be done in love" (1 Cor 16:14).

"Peace if possible; truth at all costs."
Martin Luther