

Evangelical Interfaith Dialogue

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Salvation Without a Savior?

INTRODUCTION: CORY WILLSON

Salvation is a central topic in Christian theology. Our beliefs about the nature of biblical salvation and the means by which it is attained are critically important to the Christian faith; knowing *why* these beliefs are so important should be a prerequisite for Evangelicals entering into interfaith dialogue. Such an understanding is the beginning point for knowing what beliefs we need to hold resolutely as we engage in dialogue with religious “others.”

Underlying every approach to interfaith dialogue are essential questions that must be examined if that approach is to be faithful to Christ and his gospel. Broadly, these questions include the nature of truth, the nature and dynamics of revelation, the work of God outside of the Church in the world at large, and a range of other issues. One in particular that causes divisions especially among Evangelicals is whether there is revelation in other religions and if this revelation is in any sense salvific. It is this question, for example, that drives the heated debate between inclusivists, exclusivists, and pluralists. How should we think about those who have never heard the gospel of Jesus, but nevertheless attempt to live in light of some form of knowledge of God revealed through creation? How we answer this question, and more importantly how we frame it, needs to be done with careful theological reflection; for how we frame it and accordingly answer it sets the agenda for our dialogue. That being said, however, we must always begin with a biblical understanding of salvation and not assume that salvation is understood in the same way among other religions.

In this issue, Dr. Christopher J. H. Wright, the international director of Langham Partnership International, presents a biblical theology of salvation seen through the lens of new creation and the eschatological consummation of salvation. **EIFD**

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VISION STATEMENT

This journal seeks to create space for Evangelical scholars and practitioners to dialogue about the dynamics, challenges, practices, and theology surrounding interfaith work, while remaining faithful to the gospel of Jesus and his mission for his Church.

AIMS OF THIS JOURNAL

In light of our commitment to the authority of Scripture and the gospel of Jesus Christ, this journal seeks to:

- ground interfaith dialogue in the *missio Dei*
- create space for pioneering Evangelical approaches to interfaith dialogue, drawing on a robust biblical, theological, missiological, and psychological foundation
- wrestle together publicly and as a community on the challenges, opportunities, and dangers of engaging in interfaith dialogue
- begin to heal the divisions within Evangelicalism between mission and dialogue by articulating the missiological guidelines for dialogue
- foster discussion on interfaith issues between faculty, students, and practitioners from Evangelical traditions across the globe

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THIS ISSUE AT A GLANCE:

page 3

CHRISTOPHER J. H. WRIGHT uses the eschatological text Revelation 7:9-10 to explore a biblical theology of salvation. Although the question of interfaith dialogue is not directly dealt with at length, his discussion of the nature and means of salvation has tremendous implications for interfaith dialogue. Readers will find Wright's article helpful in wrestling with the question, if salvation is found exclusively in Christ, why should we engage in interfaith dialogue? Searching for salvation through a religion—whether Christian or not—reveals several misconceptions about salvation and how it is obtained. From this understanding of salvation a discussion of the aims and expectations of interfaith dialogue can be further explored.

Responses to Dr. Wright:

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ROBERT L. GALLAGHER offers reflections on what Luke and Acts teach us about the exclusivity of salvation offered to us by God in Christ: that it is part of God's inclusive mission to extend the invitation to salvation to all peoples. He explains how salvation is a gift that is God's alone to offer, but that this offer is to be actively extended to people in every part of the world.

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JAMES T. BUTLER explores how our interactions with people of other religions can help us see dimensions of God's salvation that are often overlooked in Scripture. Affirming that salvation is the property of God alone and that "all truth is God's truth," he notes that Christians can be equipped to see the holistic nature of the salvation offered to us by our God.

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CRAIG L. BLOMBERG discusses why it is less threatening to dialogue with people from radically different religious traditions than those that are similar to our own. Counterintuitive as it may seem, in the arena of interfaith dialogue, similarity can breed more hostility than difference. In this article, Blomberg uses Christopher J. H. Wright's article as a lens to reflect on his decade-long dialogue with Latter-day Saint scholars.

seeing DIFFERENTLY

Throughout this journal, we feature photographs by Kurt Simonson that flow from his exploration of the intersection of the sacred and the mundane. On the back cover, a diptych work is featured with a specific artist statement to address its conceptual content. Meanwhile, the images found within the journal are loosely connected to the ideas in that statement, though they operate differently. Perhaps it could be said that in some of these single images, the exchanges described in the artist statement on the final page are occurring within a single frame, rather than in a diptych format, inviting the viewer to consider their confounding relationships in an even more complex manner.

Global Discussions on Interfaith Dialogue:

page 16

Any effort to move forward without a critical understanding of the past is always dangerous. This is especially true with the history of Christian experience and theology of other religions. **VELI-MATTI KÄRKKÄINEN**, a participant in the Edinburgh 2010 World Missionary Conference, reflects on his experiences in light of the first conference in 1910 and the many changes that have transpired in the Church and the world since. The discussions on interfaith dialogue and theology of religions at Edinburgh 2010 will undoubtedly have considerable impact within the Christian community around the world in the years to come.

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DONALD WESTBROOK discusses the formative role that the Lausanne Movement has played in the Evangelical tradition around the world. Understanding the history of this movement and its most recent gathering in Cape Town, South Africa, in October 2010, provides a window into the many changes underway in evangelism across continents and cultures.

Praxis:

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JOSHUA MUTHALALI, an international student at Fuller Theological Seminary, reflects on the challenges he faces in helping his church community mature in their interactions with people of other faiths. Muthalali's story captures the common experience of Christians who engage in interfaith dialogue and often find it difficult to speak to those within their own tradition about why and how Christians should be involved in such activities.

Salvation Belongs To Our God

BY CHRISTOPHER J. H. WRIGHT, *International Director, Langham Partnership International*

After this I looked, and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and in front of the Lamb. They were wearing white robes and were holding palm branches in their hands. And they cried out in a loud voice:

“Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!”

—Revelation 7:9-10 (NIV)

Introduction

Martin Luther is reputed to have said that we read the Bible forwards, but we understand the Bible backwards. That is, the whole canon only makes complete sense in the light of the great ultimate revelation of the new creation in its final book. Accordingly, it seems appropriate in our exploration of the great biblical theme of salvation to start at the end with the climactic statement quoted above. The doxology sung by the whole of redeemed humanity condenses into a few pregnant phrases the whole biblical doctrine of salvation and will serve admirably as a programmatic text for our survey.

1. Salvation Is the Property of God: “Salvation belongs to...God.”

This is the *theocentric* dimension of biblical salvation. The categorical affirmation that salvation is the property of God excludes human initiation or achievement by any means, including religion.

The form of the words in the doxology is very Hebraic: literally, “to our God is salvation.” It is the same structure for expressing a possessive relationship as the opening words of Psalm 24, “To Yahweh the earth and all its fullness”—that is, the earth belongs to Yahweh; it is his property. Similarly then, salvation is a reality that belongs to God, not to us.

Salvation, as biblically understood, is not at human disposal or a matter of human achievement. We do not own it, or control it. We cannot dispense it to others, still less sell it or offer it on our terms. We cannot destroy or threaten it for those to whom God has granted it,

nor can we decide who gets to have it, or not. Salvation belongs to God, initiated by his grace, achieved by his power, offered on his terms, secured by his promises, guaranteed by his sovereignty. God is the subject of the act of saving us. He is not the object of our attempts to gain salvation. Salvation is the result of no action of ours other than that of asking and accepting it from God.

In the Bible there are, of course, many instances when salvation comes through human agency, but even then the source of the power to save still lies with God. The judges all illustrate this principle. Gideon is told to go and deliver Israel—he would be the deliverer, but only because God would be with him (Judg. 6:14-15). But when he assembles his army, it is systematically decimated before he can begin his campaign, explicitly to ensure that God is seen to be the true source of the victory, not the size of the army (Judg. 7:2, 7; contrast the ironic refusal of God to save them in Judg. 10:11-14). Similarly, David’s victory over Goliath shows the world who really is the God with power to save (1 Sam. 17:47).

Only Yahweh, then, can save. This is the message especially of the prophets. Yahweh saves when nobody else can or does (Isa. 59:15-17). Astrologers cannot save (Isa. 47:13-14). Kings, mere mortals that they are, cannot save (Psa. 146:3). Military power cannot save (Psa. 33:16-17). And other gods are most commonly characterized as contemptibly unable to save (Isa. 43:11-13; 45:20-21). So salvation is clearly not something you can “get” from religion considered as a set of human activities or aspirations. The very question sometimes asked in the debate over other faiths, “Is there salvation in other religions?” is highly misleading, since it embodies a false



EDITORIAL NOTE:

This paper by Dr. Christopher J. H. Wright was developed in further detail with a more comprehensive treatment of salvation in the biblical texts in his book *Salvation Belongs to Our God: Celebrating the Bible’s Central Story*, published by InterVarsity Press in 2007. We are grateful to Dr. Wright for granting permission to reproduce this essay.

In order to bring this essay into dialogue with contemporary and historic views on interfaith discourse, quotations from respected theologians as well as other writings of Christopher J. H. Wright have been inserted as asides throughout this article.

premise—namely, that salvation is something you get from any religion. But according to the Bible, religion saves nobody. God does. Salvation belongs to God and is not manipulated out of him by religious activity.

We shall look at New Testament material in more depth later, but on this opening point it is worth noting that the word “savior” is applied to God eight times and to Jesus 16 times in the New Testament, and to nobody else at all, ever. And yet the term *soter* was a fairly common term in the classical world, applied to both human kings and military deliverers, and also to the great gods and heroes of mythology. But not in New Testament Christianity. Salvation belongs to our God . . . and to the Lamb. Nobody else merits even the vocabulary.

2. Salvation as the Identity of God: “Salvation belongs to our God.”

The Particularity of the Biblical, Saving God

The affirmation in the doxology of the redeemed from every nation is very specific and particular: “Salvation belongs to *our* God.” This is not some bland generic linkage between salvation and deity as an abstract transcendent concept. It is *this* God, the biblical God, the God of revelation and redemption, Yahweh the God of Israel, the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the God who is not ashamed to be called “our God.”

“The Christian does not meet his partner in dialogue as one who possesses the truth and the holiness of God, but as one who bears witness to the truth and holiness which are God’s judgment on him, and who is ready to hear that judgment spoken through the lips and life of his partner of another faith.

..The purpose of dialogue for the Christian is obedient witness to Jesus Christ who is not the property of the Church but the Lord of the Church and of all men, and who is glorified as the living Holy Spirit takes all that the Father has given to man—all men of every creed and culture—and declares it to the Church as that which belongs to Christ as Lord. In this encounter the Church is changed and the world is changed and Christ is glorified.”

Lesslie Newbigin, “The Basis, Purpose and Manner of Inter-Faith Dialogue,” *Scottish Journal of Theology* 30 (1977): 3.

This is the God to whom salvation belongs. This indeed is the God who is defined above all else precisely by his saving ability and activity.

“You were shown these things,” said Moses, speaking of the great redemptive act of the Exodus and revelatory act of Sinai, not so that you would know that there is only one God, but “so that you might know that Yahweh is God in heaven above and on the earth beneath; there is no other” (Deut. 4:35, 39). “Salvation is found in no one else [than Jesus], for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved,” said Peter (Acts 4:12). The point of God’s great saving acts is to demonstrate not just monotheism, or a theocentric worldview, but the *identity* of the true

and living God as the one and only source of salvation. Salvation is the work of *this* God, revealed as Yahweh, incarnated as Jesus of Nazareth—and of no other.

This affirmation underlies the constant importance in the Bible of *knowing* God—that is, not just knowing that some god exists, or even merely knowing truths or statements about God, but precisely in knowing who God is, or who truly is God. And the true God has proved his identity supremely through his power to save. Israel knew Yahweh alone because he alone had saved them. “I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of Egypt. You know no God but me, no Savior except me” (Hos. 13:4). “This is eternal life [which in John is synonymous with salvation]: that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent” (John 17:3 NIV).

The Impotence of Other Gods

In sharp contrast, other gods are distinguished from Yahweh most commonly by the fact that they cannot save. The early encounters between Yahweh and Baal in the book of Judges bring this out sometimes with comic intent. Gideon’s father’s reply to the men of his town who came to lynch Gideon for demolishing the altar of Baal is wonderfully sarcastic. If Baal is a god, ought he not be able to save his own altar? Or is he so weak that he actually needs this mob to “save” him? What kind of god needs to be saved by humans when the whole point of being a god is to be able to save your worshippers? Are we missing something here, citizens? (Judg. 6:31).

Similar sarcasm and scorn is poured on the great imperial gods of Babylon at a much later stage of Israel’s history (Isa. 46:1-7). Bel and Nebo are caricatured as stooping down from their heavenly residence because their idols are being carted off by their worshippers, struggling under the burden as they flee from their fallen city. What kind of god is it that cannot save even its own idol, let alone its worshippers? What strange reversal is it that makes the very worshippers find their god is now a burden they have to carry, rather than a strong champion who will carry them in their hour of need (as Israel’s God had done from the dawn of their history, vv. 3-4)? No, the very nature of these false gods is that “though one cries out to it, it does not answer; it cannot save” (v. 7 NIV). This is as true at the individual, domestic level as it is in grand imperial politics. The deluded worshipper of an idol seems blinded to the sham and impotence of the god he has created for himself as a byproduct of heating and eating. He calls to it for salvation, but that is the one thing it can never deliver (Isa. 44:9-20, esp. 17, 20). False gods never fail to fail. The trouble is, we never fail to forget this and go on putting our faith in them.

3. Salvation and the Story of God: “Salvation belongs to our God.”

As well as the *particularity* of the expression “our God,”



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there is also its *covenantal* resonance. The phrase “The LORD our God” is the most common summation of covenantal faith in the Old Testament. “You have declared this day that the LORD is your God. . . . and the LORD has declared this day that you are his people” (Deut. 26:17-18; cf. 6:4-5). Salvation, then, belongs to the covenantal God; not just to *this God*, but to the God of *this people* and this history, to our God. Biblical salvation has to be understood in the context of God’s covenantal relationship to his people, Old and New Testament. This covenantal, historical, relational dimension of salvation generates a number of other features worthy of note.

Ecclesiological

God’s salvation enters history through a community. God’s covenant with Abraham in Genesis 12:1-3 and the following narratives is set against the backdrop of global human sin and rebellion, which climaxed in the great failed attempt at self-salvation, the tower of Babel. In a world in which the human race now lives in division and strife upon an earth that strains under God’s curse, God initiates a redemptive covenant of blessing. *Blessing* is a key word in Genesis—the promise and mandate of creation in chapters 1 and 2; the echo of that creation after the flood (9:1); and now again the promise of God to and through Abraham. Salvation means blessing *on* a particular people and blessing *through* a particular people.

The nation that would come from Abraham, then, would be a people who would know the saving blessing

of God. But inherent in the Abrahamic covenant was the further promise of blessing to the nations. Indeed, this is the bottom line of the Abrahamic covenant—textually and theologically. “In/through you all the families/nations of the earth will find blessing” (Gen. 12:3, etc.). Israel would be the people of this saving, covenantal God whom they would call “our God”—precisely for the sake of other nations who did not yet know him as such. The election and salvation of *Israel* was ultimately for the blessing of the *nations*.

Such considerations clearly inspired the composer of Psalm 67, who turns the Aaronic blessing into a prayer—“May God be gracious to us and bless us and make his face shine upon us”—and then immediately turns it outwards in a remarkable “missional” prayer for the blessing and salvation of the world: “that your ways may be known on earth, *your salvation among all nations*” (NIV).

Possibly the most startling text in the Old Testament to portray the implications of such a theology of salvation for the nations (among many that point towards that

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great goal) is Isaiah 19:19-25. Following a prophecy in which the prophet declares an oracle of comprehensive divine judgment upon the Egypt of his own day, he looks to the eschatological future and dares to envisage a day when, in a gloriously ironic reversal of exodus history, the Egyptians will cry out to Yahweh from their oppressors and he will send them “a savior and defender, and he will rescue them” (v. 20). Furthermore, not only can God offer salvation to his former enemies, he can turn them into the vehicle of blessing to others.

In that day, Israel will be the third, along with Egypt and Assyria, a blessing on the earth. The LORD Almighty will bless them, saying, “Blessed be Egypt my people, Assyria my handiwork, and Israel my inheritance” (vv. 24-25).

“It is this fundamental fact about the Christian gospel—that it is good news, not a good idea; that it is the declaration of historical events by which God has intervened to save us from our sin—which exposes the inadequacy of all other religions. There is no salvation in them, not because they have nothing in common with Christianity in their beliefs (some do), but because they do not recount these events and therefore do not put people in touch with what God has already done to save them.”

Christopher J. H. Wright, *The Uniqueness of Jesus* (Greenville: Monarch Books, 2001), 64.

The beneficiaries of Abrahamic blessing become the agents of it to others. Thus the very nature of the people of God—Israel—is redefined to include the nations in the eschatological fulfillment of the covenant that brought them into existence. The blessing of salvation for Israel means the blessing of salvation for the world.

Historical

To speak of “our God” is to speak of the God who engaged with Israel throughout their long historical journey. Indeed the story of the covenants in the Bible is the story of God, and vice versa. God engages with real people in real history, and the Bible is the story of that engagement. The succession of covenants recorded in the Old Testament presents to us the developing story of God’s saving response to the plight of humanity. The covenant with Noah ensures the continuation of life on earth—it provides the universal platform on which it has been possible for us to live as a sinful human race on a cursed planet with some assurance of survival. The covenant with Abraham launches the community of blessing—both blessed and being a blessing to the nations. The covenant at Sinai through Moses binds that national community to Yahweh after the great salvation of the Exodus. The covenant with David echoes the Abrahamic, provides Israel with the dubious historical phenomenon of kingship, but points beyond that to a messianic rule that will transcend the historical throne of David. The new covenant of prophetic promise

points forward to the era in which we now live on this side of the incarnation and Easter, and on beyond even that to the future hope of new creation.¹

Biblical salvation, then, because it is embodied in the historical covenants, is not merely a set of doctrines to be learned or an esoteric personal experience to be enjoyed. It is fundamentally a story, or rather, *the Story*. It is constituted within the grand biblical metanarrative that forms the biblical worldview, of creation, fall, redemption in history, and the new creation that lies ahead. All the particular historical moments and all the doctrinal minutiae only make sense within that overarching framework. The gospel is the good news about what the biblical God has done, is doing, and will finally do within history. Salvation, therefore, in both Testaments, shares in this past, present, and future shape of the whole biblical story. God has saved his people in many great events of the past; God is constantly engaged in hearing the cry for salvation in the present; and God will ultimately save his people and his creation forever.

The great doxology of the redeemed in Revelation 7, then, celebrates the salvation of the God whose saving work encompasses the whole of biblical covenantal history. To celebrate salvation is to retell that story.

Holistic

Since the experience of salvation lies within the historical covenant relationship, it has a very broad and comprehensive range of significance—in both Old and New Testaments. “God saves” covers a huge range of realities precisely because of the immense variety of circumstances in which God’s saving engagement with people takes place through the great sweep of biblical history. We ought to resist the temptation to discount what we might regard as “ordinary” or “material” or even trivial instances of the language of salvation and to isolate only those we might deem “theological” or “transcendent” or “eternal.” We need to let the whole biblical witness speak for itself.²

So in both Testaments, then, God saves people in a wide variety of physical, material, and temporal ways from all kinds of need, danger, and threat. But of course, and also in both Testaments, God’s saving action goes much further. The Bible recognizes that all those proximate evils from which God saves his people are manifestations of the far deeper disorder in human life. Enemies, lies, disease, oppression, false accusation, violence, death—all of these things from which we pray to be saved are the results of *rebellion and sin in the human heart*. That is where the deepest source of the problem lies. There is, therefore, a need for God to deal with sin—sin in the world and sin in his own people. The biblical God who saves is *the God who deals with sin*. Other claimed salvations of other posturing gods are tinkering cosmetics.

So, reviewing the sweep of this section, we can see the breadth of the biblical language of salvation.

It is holistic—encompassing both personal and community needs, both physical and spiritual, both present and future, both historical and eternal, both this life and the world to come. We ought to preserve and affirm this biblical totality of God’s saving action, and not dichotomize it, or restrictively assign terms like “theological” to only one set of spiritual or eschatological dimensions. Ultimately the biblical God has saved, does save, and will save his people and his world at every level of our humanity and createdness.

Experiential

Salvation is a matter of *celebrated experience*—whether in recent personal testimony, as in so many Psalms, or in collective historical memory of the great saving events that constitute our knowledge of God as Savior, or in the faith imagination of worship and the advance celebration of an anticipated future. Several aspects of this experiential side of salvation may be noted.

First, because salvation belongs to our God and is therefore a matter of his initiative and his power, it is experienced on our side through the “cry for help” that is so prominent in the Old Testament (individually and nationally); through repentant *turning* towards him and away from sin, rebellion or idolatry; through *trust* in God; and through *acceptance* of whatever he does in response. The salvation of God is for those who call on him, fear him, cry to him, and love him (Psa. 145:17-19; Isa. 25:9; Isa. 30:15). And everywhere in the New Testament, of course, salvation is offered by God’s grace only on the basis of repentance and faith. As the simple tag goes, we experience salvation by receiving it, not by achieving it.

Second, because salvation is covenantal, we are saved as part of the people of God as a whole and through *connection to the story of God’s saving action* among that people. “How can they call on the one they have not believed in? And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard?” (Rom. 10:14). These questions apply, of course, as much to Israelites in the Old Testament (as Paul does apply them) as to any other human beings. Hence the great importance attached to the constant teaching of the great traditions of Israel’s faith, the call to love, trust and obey their covenantal God, in order to appropriate the blessing of his saving acts on their behalf. The saving God must be *known*. Above all, God’s people must know the Story. They must tell and retell the story of the Exodus. They must tell and retell the story of the cross and resurrection. Salvation is through faith, and “faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word of Christ” (Rom. 10:17).

Third, because of the importance of the story of salvation, we can appreciate *the key role of the Scriptures* in mediating salvation. For it is in the Bible that we have the record of those saving events. Here is the testimony of those who experienced them firsthand—the generation of the Exodus, the witnesses of the

cross and resurrection of Jesus. But what about the generations who followed? What about the rest of us? How do we enter into the experience of a salvation that is rooted in unique historical events? By knowing the story, assimilating it as our own, and trusting the God to whom it testifies. This was true for every generation of Israelites after the Exodus. For them, as for us, it was a matter of knowing the story, knowing what it demonstrated, knowing the God of whom it spoke. And knowledge of that story and the God of the story comes to us through the Scriptures.

seeing DIFFERENTLY



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This explains the great emphasis on “*the word of salvation*” in the New Testament. This is not because salvation is a verbal abstract or a systematized philosophy. Rather it is because salvation is a narrative needing to be told, good news needing to be announced, events needing to be known, revealing a God needing to be trusted (Luke 8:12; John 5:31-40; Cor. 15:2ff; 2 Tim. 3:15). Biblical salvation, then, is inseparable from the biblical word—the Scriptures themselves. Salvation is not some subjective experience of esoteric faith and individual piety. It is rather a *biblically informed experience*, an entering into *this* story of *this* God saving the world through *these* events, and ultimately through *this* person, his Son, the Messiah, Jesus of Nazareth.

“The missiological urgency of the interfaith debate must be grounded in a fully biblical understanding of the uniqueness of God’s saving work in history, which means starting with the affirmation of this and similar Old Testament texts about the one and only living God, and not with a Jesus severed from his scriptural and historical roots. For this same reason, Christians are not at liberty to abandon the Hebrew Scriptures of the Old Testament or to regard the Scriptures of other religions or cultures as equivalent and adequate preparations for Christ. For the thrust of this text is clear: it is *these* events (and no others) that witness to *this* God (and no other). And the thrust of our New Testament is equally clear: It is *this* God (and no other) who became flesh to reconcile the world to himself in *this* man, Jesus of Nazareth (and no other).”

Christopher J. H. Wright, *The Mission of God: Unlocking the Bible’s Grand Narrative* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2006), 385.

Fourth, our experience of salvation is mediated not only scripturally but also *sacramentally*. The narrative is not merely to be recollected. It is to be reenacted in such a way as to connect each generation with the living power of the original events themselves. For Israel, of course, this was the annual Passover; for Christians, the Lord’s Supper, celebrated “as often as you do this, in remembrance of me.” These feasts and sacraments are more than just memorials of the events they celebrate. In the sacrament we enter a kind of two-way time machine which, on the one hand, puts us “as if we were there.” Every generation of Israelites says of themselves, “We were slaves of Pharaoh in Egypt but the LORD brought us out” (e.g., Deut. 6:21). Every Christian hears the words as addressed to him or herself, “This is my body, given for *you*.” On the other hand, the sacrament brings the past events “as if now”—that is, mediating the effect and power of the original, unrepeatable, and once-for-all saving act of God into our present lives, experiencing afresh the liberation of exodus, the grace and cleansing blood of the cross.

Unique

This *narrative* nature of biblical salvation is the essence of its uniqueness. Salvation is not some mystical rainbow’s end in the celestial realm to which all religions may aspire in their different ways. Salvation

is not what lies at the summit of a mountain, which all religions laboriously climb from their different starting points. Biblically, salvation denotes the “*having-happened-ness*” of the historical events by which God has acted to save humanity and creation. Salvation is *what God has done already*, as a result of which certain future outcomes are assured. Salvation is not a dream for the future towards which we may bend our efforts indefinitely. Biblical salvation declares that God so loved the world that he gave his only Son. It affirms that God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself. It assures us that Christ died for our sins and was raised again on the third day for our justification. It asserts that God saved us, not because of any righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy. Note the past tense and the divine subject of all these great affirmations.

Other religions and ideologies do not save because *they do not tell this story*. They may have scriptures and cultures of great antiquity, wisdom, and dignity, but they do not tell this story—the story of our covenant God and his saving action in history. They cannot therefore “connect” people to that story and its sovereign, saving Subject. They have no gospel to tell to the nations.

This is also why we must resist the suggestion popular in some quarters that we may substitute the scriptures of other faiths for the Old Testament. If other religions may be the preparation that leads people to faith in Christ, goes the argument, then we may allow those other scriptures to function as a culturally appropriate alternative to the Jewish Scriptures. But this is to ignore the necessity of the Old Testament as the Scriptures that tell the story and declare the promise that lead to Jesus, the Scriptures that provided Jesus’s sense of identity and mission, the Scriptures with which the early church went out and turned the world upside down once they read them in the light of Jesus the Messiah (as he told them to do, Luke 24:44-47). Without the Old Testament the story loses its beginning, its sense of direction, and its ultimate plot. No, a biblical perspective on salvation needs the perspective of the *whole Bible*. For it was its witness to salvation that generated, informed, and determined the shape and the limits of the whole canon.

4. Salvation and the Sovereignty of God: “Our God who sits on the throne.”

Returning to the doxology of redeemed humanity, we find their next phrase equally resonant of Old Testament notes. Yahweh is, in many texts, the God who is seated on the throne of the universe. Both Isaiah and Ezekiel had visions of that throne of God and of the overwhelming glory that surrounded it. Two brief points may be made.

Missiological

In Isaiah 40-55, the context that most probably provides the source for the phrase in Revelation 7, Yahweh’s

sovereignty over the nations, over their gods, and over all of history is categorically affirmed. The point of the affirmation, however, is not merely to dethrone the gods of the nations and announce their defeat. It is also the basis on which God claims all nations and offers them also salvation. If Yahweh alone is the source of salvation, then he is so *not only for Israel but also for all nations*. “There is no God apart from me, a righteous God and a Savior; there is none but me.” Thus the call goes out to the “fugitives from the nations,” as it did to the remnant of Israel—“*Turn to me and be saved, all you ends of the earth, for I am God and there is no other.*” So then, the universal missional task of God’s people flows directly from the universal offer of salvation. And that in turn flows from the universal sovereignty of God—from the very throne of God to the world. As Jesus said, “all authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me.” So, on this basis of this sovereign lordship of Christ, the missional mandate follows immediately: “therefore, as you go, disciple all the nations” (Matt. 28:18-20 ISV).

Eschatological

Who is it who sings this doxology of salvation in Revelation 7:9-10? It is “a great multitude that no one could count, *from every nation, tribe, people and language.*” The *echo of the Abrahamic covenant* could not be clearer. Here, in eschatological fulfillment, is God’s faithfulness to his promise to Abraham, that his seed would be as uncountable as the stars or the sand, that people of all nations would be blessed through him. Biblical salvation, then, belongs to our God because it is this God who will have kept his promise. “All nations,” God said to Abraham, who only just managed to believe it in the extreme improbability of not having even one son to his name. All nations, it was promised, and all nations it shall be. The sovereign faithfulness of God guarantees not just a redeemed, multinational humanity, but also, of course, from other texts, a whole new creation as well. Ultimately the whole created order—human, angelic, and creaturely—will join this song of praise (Rev. 5:11-14). This is not just a vague dream of what might be, but a confident vision of what will be because of the one who is seated on the throne.

5. Salvation and the Lamb of God: “Salvation belongs to our God...and to the Lamb.”

Here finally we come to the *Christocentric* dimension of biblical salvation. The salvation that belongs exclusively to “our God”—the biblical God of the covenants—belongs with equal exclusivity to the Lamb of God, the one through whom God has accomplished his saving will.

The earliest Jewish followers of Jesus, as devout scriptural believers, knew that Yahweh alone is God and there is no other source of salvation among the gods or on the earth. This they knew because their

Bible told them so, not least Deuteronomy and Isaiah. Yet now they are so utterly convinced that Jesus of Nazareth, their contemporary, so shares the very identity of Yahweh their God that they use the same exclusively salvific language of him. Peter declares that salvation is now to be found exclusively in Jesus and in no other name under heaven (Acts 4:12). This is consistent with all the preaching recorded in that book (cf. Acts 2:38; 5:31; 13:38) and is the settled resolution of the first council of the church, “We believe it is through the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ that we [Jews] are saved, just as they [Gentiles] are” (Acts 15:11). Later, another Jewish believer describes Jesus as the author or pioneer of salvation (Heb. 2:10), the source of our eternal salvation (5:9), and the mediator of complete salvation for all who come to God through him (7:25). *Biblical salvation is utterly Christ-shaped.*

The Lamb, in Revelation, alternates between the Lamb who was slain and the Lamb on the throne. Both are essential of course to his role in salvation. Salvation belongs to the Lamb who was slain, because the source and ground of our salvation is the historical, once-for-all atonement achieved by Jesus on the cross. But salvation also belongs to the Lamb on the throne, because he ever reigns with the Father. The sovereignty of the Lord of the universe is shared with Christ. This is clear not only in the exalted claim of Matthew 28:18, but even more so in the amazing affirmation of the early Christian hymn in Philippians 2:9-11. Whoever first composed this stanza has taken a text from Isaiah 45:23-24 (in which Yahweh affirms that every human knee and tongue will acknowledge Yahweh himself as the sole source of righteousness/salvation and strength), and without hesitation applied the same language to Jesus. The uniqueness of Yahweh as the only saving God is now transformed into the uniqueness of Jesus as the only saving Lord to whom every knee will bow. The two have become one, because in Jesus of Nazareth this saving God has walked among us, our Emmanuel, our Jehoshua, God of our salvation. And in the person of his Son, this saving God took our sins on himself on the cross, as the Lamb who was slain to purchase people for God from every tribe and language and people and nation.

Salvation belongs to our God, who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb, who alone is worthy of all praise and honor and glory and power, for ever and ever. Amen. EIFD

Endnotes

- 1 I have surveyed this sequence more fully in *Knowing Jesus through the Old Testament* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1992), ch. 2.
- 2 For a fuller discussion on the holistic nature of salvation in the Old Testament verb *yasa* and its derivative nouns, as well as the New Testament use of *sozo*, see Christopher J. H. Wright, “Salvation and Human Need,” in *Salvation Belongs to Our God* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2007), 15-36.

Response:
Robert L. Gallagher

Salvation: Narrow Way but Broad Mission

Robert L. Gallagher is president of the American Society of Missiology and an associate professor of intercultural studies at Wheaton College Graduate School.

I would like to respond to one aspect of Christopher J. H. Wright's article and show how his biblical understanding of salvation can be used to guide followers of Christ in dialoguing with persons of other religions. Wright's opening statement that "salvation is the property of God" is a biblical barb to those who advocate relativism in their approaches to interreligious dialogue. He claims that human endeavor has nothing to do with God's salvation, including other religions. This confronts the heart of the interfaith debate since in arguing that God is the only source of salvation and not any human agency or gods, the author attacks the claim that salvation can be found in other religions. How can you receive salvation from other religions when the Bible clearly indicates it is only God who is the initiator and dispenser of salvation? Wright continues, "But according to the Bible, religion saves nobody. God does. Salvation belongs to God and is not manipulated out of him by religious activity." In other words, he initially presses the fundamental prickly question as to whether there is truth in other religions outside the Christian camp, and if that work of the Holy Spirit can lead people to the revelation of the one true living God.

On this first point, Wright supports his argument by referring briefly to the New Testament for reinforcement, and in particular the word "savior" being exclusively used for God and Jesus "and to nobody else at all"—even though the word "savior" was

in common use throughout the first-century Greco-Roman world (later in the article Wright speaks of Luke "festooning the language of salvation around the arrival of Jesus"¹ by using salvation terms seven times in his first three chapters: 1:47, 69, 71, 77; 2:11, 30; 3:6). In this brief response, I will expand on this position focusing on the writings of Luke—a Gentile doctor and travel companion to Paul (Col. 4:14). The author of Luke-Acts—in writing to Gentile Christians—declared Jesus of Nazareth as the road to God's salvation. In God's concern for all people (Luke 2:14), the writer specifically included Gentiles (Luke 2:30-32; 4:25-26, 27; 7:2-10; 13:29; 24:47) and the marginalized (those whom traditional Judaism placed beyond the boundaries) in God's panorama of salvation, particularly highlighting the dreaded Samaritans (Luke 9:51-55; 10:30-37; 17:15-19).

Luke's concept of "salvation"—mentioned ten times in Luke-Acts (Luke 1:69, 77; 2:30; 3:6; 19:9; Acts 4:12; 13:26, 47; 16:17; 28:28) and only once in the other three gospels (i.e., John 4:22)—asserted that only God has the power "to save." This was indicated fifteen times in Luke (e.g., 7:50; 8:12; 13:23; 18:26) and eleven times in Acts (e.g., 2:21, 47; 4:12; 11:14; 15:1, 11), compared to Matthew (thirteen times), Mark (ten times), and John (five times). The way to God's salvation is only via his Son, Jesus the "Savior" (Luke 1:47; 2:11; Acts 5:31; 13:23)—with one other reference in the Gospels (i.e., John 4:42). And not all will be saved (Luke 8:12; 16:8; cf. Luke 12:29-30, 51-53), however, only those who embrace the responsibility to repent (Luke 12:13-21; 17:26-37; Acts 17:30-31). To summarize his argument, Wright stresses that self-salvation "is not even a remotely biblical perspective."² Or in scriptural terms, "Salvation belongs to our God...and the Lamb."

Why was there such a strong emphasis by the Gentile author of Luke-Acts to his non-Jewish audience (in a mosaic of religions) concerning God's only way of "salvation," by Jesus the "savior," who "saves"? And there was no wiggle room when Peter declared before the Sanhedrin Council, "Salvation

is found in no one else [than Jesus], for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved" (Acts 4:12). Wright provides part of the answer to this question in his section on the story of salvation being a celebrated experience—especially his emphasis on the important role of the Scriptures. Luke recorded the historic story of the teachings, miracles, death, burial, resurrection, ascension, and ongoing Spirit-mission of Jesus the Messiah—the testimony of these events by those who experienced them firsthand (Acts 4:33)—so that coming generations might also embrace for themselves the salvation of God through Jesus Christ: "By knowing the story, assimilating it as our own, and trusting the God whom it testifies." Biblical salvation is woven together with the Scriptures and is thus "a biblically informed experience." This leads Wright to the conclusion, "Other religions and ideologies do not save because they do not tell this story" of God's saving action in history. Furthermore, he rejects the notion of substituting the sacred writings of other faiths for the Hebrew Scriptures, since it is only the Old Testament that has the story that explains the promised Messiah and his mission to all the nations (Luke 24:44-49; Acts 26:22b-23).

Another answer to why Luke underlined the idea of salvation is found in Wright's initial exhortation to understand God's bigger purpose in light of the final outcome where "a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people, and language [were] standing before the throne and in front of the Lamb" (Rev. 7:9 NRSV). In this backward glance at the doctrine of salvation, the end result was mission: God through the church and beyond is reaching across barriers of culture, language, geography, ideology, and ethnicity to bring people to the Kingdom of Christ by announcing the gospel in speech and social action. This is echoed in Luke-Acts. Luke's major purpose was to write a missional history of the ministry of Jesus and the early church to encourage the people of the Way to follow these two historic examples—to give hope and courage to their fear-filled future of persecution in a pluralistic world. As Wright himself affirms, this was consistent with the preaching record in Acts that pronounced that the salvation of Yahweh and Jesus was identical (2:38; 5:31; 13:38), as was the outcome declared at the Jerusalem Council: "We believe it is through the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ that we

Luke's major purpose was to ... encourage the people of the Way to follow these two historic examples—to give hope and courage to their fear-filled-future of persecution in a pluralistic world.

[Jews] are saved, just as they [Gentiles] are” (Acts 15:11). And the missional multitudes shouted before the throne of God, “Salvation belongs to our God...and the Lamb.” **EIFD**

Endnotes

- 1 This quotation is taken from Wright’s lengthier treatment of this topic in *Salvation Belongs to Our God: Celebrating the Bible’s Central Story* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2007), 28.
- 2 Ibid, 44.

Response: James T. Butler

Dialogue as Witness to the Fullness of Our Salvation

James T. Butler is associate professor of Old Testament at Fuller Theological Seminary.

From his training and sensibilities as a biblical scholar and missiologist, Chris Wright is finely equipped to offer us guidance in thinking about how witness and dialogue are related in interfaith encounters. In his hands, the joyous affirmation of the great and diverse multitude standing before God’s throne in Revelation 7:10 becomes a powerful vehicle for expositing what we as Christians must confess about our salvation. It would be very difficult to give a more felicitous summary of our hope in God through Christ. There is nothing here that I would not fully affirm and wish for every Christian to affirm; as we think of our conversations with other faiths, surely we want to bring all of this joyous confession with us as the “convicted” part of our posture of “convicted civility.”¹ If we are fortunate, indeed, our honest and full-voiced testimony will evoke an appreciative, equally honest response, and our conversations will move past “politeness at the peripheries” to deeply respectful engagement. Superficial agreement should not be the goal of interfaith work: “salvation is not what lies at the summit of a mountain, which all religions laboriously climb from their different starting points,” and starting from such an assumption is reductive and offensive to all involved.

Consequently Wright is concerned not only to map out the full range of Christian confession—he also wants to put out border markers, red flags that warn us against losing our way in enthusiasm for shared paths or

seeing DIFFERENTLY



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in temptation to shallow accommodation in the public square. Here we turn from summaries of what our contributions to dialogue should be to warnings about where we should not venture. The idol parodies of the Old Testament warn us of the futility of considering the merits of other gods: “False gods never fail to fail.” Only the biblical God takes salvation to the root problem of sin, while “other claimed salvations of other posturing gods are tinkering cosmetics.” The story of Israel and the church is unique, and

expand our own convictions while helping us to respect the integrity of the claims of other religious traditions?

One problem in speaking comprehensively of salvation is to find an adequate way of expressing what Wright calls its “holistic” character. He rightly recognizes the “temptation” in popular usage to “discount” those experiences of “ordinary’ or ‘material’ or even trivial” aspects of what the Bible calls salvation in favor of those we think of as “‘theological’ or ‘transcendent’ or ‘eternal’”:

But for all of Wright’s caveats, the tight focus of his language may help to perpetuate the traditional blinders in our thinking about God’s benefits, keeping us from recognizing them in “every level of our humanity and createdness.” By isolating the Hebrew and Greek terms commonly translated into English as “save” and privileging sacrificial imagery, his exposition neglects the richness of biblical vocabulary and imagery that he acknowledges it should include. Christians commonly associate “salvation” with blood

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“A dead thing can go with the stream, but only a living thing can go against it.”

— G. K. CHESTERTON, *THE EVERLASTING MAN*, 1925

“other religions and ideologies do not save because they do not tell this story.” Do such caveats suggest that interfaith encounters are best limited to clarifying the participants’ claims, so that we can agree about what we disagree about? Or might we find room for more positive outcomes, for surprises of discovery that deepen and enrich and

we should keep in mind that the biblical testimony is that “God saves people in a wide variety of physical, material and temporal ways from all kinds of need, danger and threat.” Still, underlying all of our needs is the fundamental reality of our alienation from God, our sin, and therefore “the biblical God who saves is the God who deals with sin.”

that covers sin, but less commonly imagine foes defeated; again, they think of their “redemption” as being accomplished on the cross, but do not imagine diseases healed, debts cancelled, family property restored, slavery ended. Consider, for instance, if we chose to complement Wright’s selection of Revelation 7:10 with Jesus’s inaugural reading

of Isaiah 61:1-2, in which the work of the Christ, the anointed one, is “to bring good news to the poor, ...to proclaim release to the captives, and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free” (Luke 4:18-19 NRSV). Were such deeds of Jesus’s ministry only a “credentialing” for his work on the cross, or did they proclaim and inaugurate the beginning of the reign of God?

But more problematic, perhaps, is our tendency to limit God’s benefits to salvation from our afflictions and our failings. We have no way in such a framework to cultivate or even to acknowledge our God-given resources, strengths, or achievements. Years ago, reassessing a biblical theology movement that had celebrated the “God who acts,” Claus Westermann suggested the need for recognizing not only the “saving God of history,” but also the “blessing God of creation.” Blessing is not related to critical events so much as to durative processes, to the “quiet, continuous, flowing, and unnoticed working of God” in the intervals of our lives in which God “gives growth and prosperity..., in which he lets children be born and grow up, in which he gives success in work.”² Beyond the life of individuals, societies are also blessed with the natural gifts of fertility and productivity, of the formation of institutions and culture and corporate values, of security and peace. Israel made use of implements and architecture, of laws and wisdom, of cultic practices and government offices that were a part of the general cultural inheritance of the ancient Near East in which she lived. God provided revelatory instruments for refining his purposes with these borrowed elements, so that agricultural festivals were reinterpreted in connection with historical events and royal institutions were brought under covenantal discipline. But God was not absent from the long processes that created this cultural heritage, or from the plenitude of peoples and societies that brought them into being.

What implications might we draw from this wider purview of God’s work in the world? I can only offer a few reflections based upon my experiences of interfaith collaboration and study with Jewish colleagues and friends.

First, I have been impressed with how inseparable justification and sanctification are in thinking about salvation. Simply put, my experiences of Jewish life and worship have helped me to articulate my deep need to not just “get right with God” but also to grow more like the God whom I profess to love.

Paul’s crisis on the Damascus road still finds a vivid counterpart in my memory, but now I also think about how Paul valued his own deep formation in the “law and prophets,” and how he instructed the churches to build disciplines for the work of the Spirit. I still feel the weight of the Gospels’ climactic closures around cross and empty tomb, but I am intrigued to ask about the importance of Jesus’s own formation (Luke 2:41-52) and of his instruction of his disciples toward spiritual maturity. Both the *kerygma* and the *didache*, the preaching and the teaching of the church, become vital to my salvation.

Second, I have become more interested in how we may think of God’s work in the world outside of the boundaries of the church. How may Christians be involved in the “public square,” both in contributing to public institutions and in serving societal needs? In particular, can we join with people of other religious convictions in mutual encouragement and support in such work, in a way that witnesses to secular society? And how does such engagement form part of God’s salvific work?

Finally, I have come to expect surprises. I have been awakened to texts. I have found new disciplines. I have discovered common problems. I have been humbled to find greater response to God in a non-Christian friend, only to remember Jesus’s words about where faith may be found. I have prayed with people who cannot use the name of Jesus, uncertain of my theological grounds but convicted that we are not addressing different gods. I have found new joy in making witness of my own faith, not as obligation but as sharing something supremely good with friends who trust that I care about them. EIFD

Endnotes

- 1 Richard J. Mouw, *Uncommon Decency: Christian Civility in an Uncivil World* (Rev. ed.; Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2010).
- 2 Claus Westermann, *Elements of Old Testament Theology*, trans. D. W. Stott (Atlanta: John Knox, 1982), 103; cf. pp. 35-117 more generally.

Response:
Craig L. Blomberg

Is Wright Right with the Latter-day Saints?

Craig L. Blomberg is Distinguished Professor of New Testament, Denver Seminary, Littleton, Colorado

Editorial Note: throughout this article the terms “Latter-day Saint” [LDS] and “Mormon” are used interchangeably.

I have always greatly benefited from Chris Wright’s scholarship and have agreed with just about everything he writes. I had the privilege to read and review both his large book, *The Mission of God: Unlocking the Bible’s Grand Narrative* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2006), and his smaller offshoot from it, *Salvation Belongs to Our God: Celebrating the Bible’s Central Story* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2008), both for the website of the Irish Bible Institute in Dublin. I am thus grateful for this opportunity to interact with this even more abbreviated offshoot and to reflect on some applications to the ongoing Evangelical-Mormon dialogue, of which I have been a part for eleven years now, organized after the completion of my own personal dialogue with Stephen Robinson, published as *How Wide the Divide? A Mormon and an Evangelical in Conversation* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1997).

Evangelical Christian interaction with those sectarian breakaway groups from modern Protestantism sometimes identified as “cults” curiously seems to foster worse behavior and attitudes than does dialogue with world religions that share no common roots with historic Christianity. One might imagine with so much in common, especially ethically, socially, and politically, that Evangelical-LDS dialogue would be easier

...can we join with people of other religious convictions in mutual encouragement and support in such work, in a way that witnesses to secular society?

than, say, Evangelical-Buddhist conversation. Reading the rhetoric in the so-called counter-cult industry suggests otherwise. The religious conversation partner who is almost “wholly other” is often easier to talk civilly with than the one for which a kind of “sibling rivalry” finds the two competing to be the sole heir of a common religious history.

Applying Wright’s article reminds us how much Mormons and Evangelicals have in common, even theologically. First, both groups claim the God of the Scriptures (Jehovah in the English of the King James Version, the official translation of the Bible

true doctrine disappeared. Most Protestants have remained content with a “Reformation,” though the Stone-Campbell movement of the early nineteenth century called for a full-fledged “Restoration.” Mormonism emerged as the black sheep of this Restorationist movement, rejecting the goals of Alexander Campbell and Barton Stone to form a movement to unite all true Christians. Instead LDS have often claimed that they *are* the only true Christians. When they haven’t gone that far, at least they have usually claimed to be the “one true Church of Jesus Christ” on earth. Again it is easy to see how this can

believe the Spirit provides for them that the Book of Mormon is true, and that therefore Joseph Smith is a true prophet. From those convictions all the rest of the LDS superstructure proceeds. To be sure, many Evangelical testimonies rise little above the level of “God said it, I believe it, and that settles it for me”—admirable faith but awful apologetics, because it enables one to get absolutely nowhere in conversation with someone who does not affirm either or both of the first two premises. Thus evidences for the faith typically play a much larger role in Evangelical than in Mormon life and mission.

The sovereignty of God can appear to take a back seat in LDS thought in comparison with the deification of humanity. Again, different wings of the church will vary their emphases somewhat. Some claim to mean little more than C. S. Lewis did when he spoke of glorified, resurrected human beings one day appearing similar enough to deity to tempt one to worship them were it possible today to see what they would be like then. In other instances, God and humanity have become joint members of the same species, a huge barrier to interfaith rapprochement.

Finally, Wright’s appropriate emphasis on historic Christianity’s Christocentricity poses some of the same problems for dialogue with the LDS as its theocentricity does. Both faiths claim to worship the same Jesus of the New Testament while at times defining their terms so differently that the common language masks the dissimilarities. Yet at other times, the reverse takes place, when members of the two faiths are saying much the same thing but don’t realize it because they are using quite different terminology. Paul’s words in Galatians 1:8-9 about anyone, even an angel of God (including Moroni—the angel whose statue appears atop every LDS temple?), who teaches any other gospel being anathema, do not help ecumenical endeavors here. On the other hand, Paul’s harsh words were originally intended for in-house consumption, against the Judaizers who had infiltrated the Galatian churches, not for those in other churches or outside religious groups.

Clearly much work remains. Wright’s five points, however, have highlighted the main areas that have independently emerged as most crucial—and most sensitive—in Evangelical-LDS dialogue, and we have seen progress even in these areas. Doubtless, they will prove central in all comparable efforts as well. **EIFD**

Both faiths claim to worship the same Jesus of the New Testament while at times defining their terms so differently that the common language masks the dissimilarities.

for the LDS) as their God and can thus be described as *theocentric*. The problem for Evangelicals is that the uniquely Mormon scriptures (the Book of Mormon, the Doctrine and Covenants, and the Pearl of Great Price) create a more anthropomorphic deity than the Bible itself does, most notably with God the Father having a human body. Noncanonical Mormon theology has often gone one large step further in believing that, in eternity past, God was once a man just like us, that is, finite. This conviction is the product of Joseph Smith’s famous King Follett funeral sermon, preached near the end of his life and considerably more radical than his earlier teachings, especially in the Book of Mormon. Many contemporary LDS, however, reject (or at least “shelve” as a mystery) these additional teachings and insist on the full infinity, eternality, deity, and sovereignty of the Lord God as he has been known since the creation of this universe and as he always will be in the future.

Both Evangelical and Latter-day Saint faith likewise share the conviction that they are heirs to the promises to Israel and represent the restoration of the church from the apostolic era. Both believe that, as Eastern Orthodoxy and Roman Catholicism emerged, many “plain and precious truths” were lost, or at least lost sight of, from first-century Christianity. What they disagree on is how quickly, how seriously, and how substantially

stifle dialogue. Again, too, however, some are recognizing today that there may be genuine churches outside of Mormonism, even if not as complete. A common metaphor compares the non-LDS to the 40- or 60-watt light bulb, with the LDS as 100-watt bulbs.

Wright’s reflections on the experiential and the historical dimensions of biblical Christianity form a suitable backdrop for reflection on another set of similarities and differences between Evangelicals and Mormons. While the nineteenth-century narrative of Mormon persecution and the treks ever westward—first under Joseph as far as Nauvoo, Illinois, and then under Brigham Young all the way to the Great Salt Lake Basin—prove very defining for LDS identity, the biblical narrative often takes second place in comparison.

Tellingly, no unambiguous archeological evidence for a single event in the Mormon scriptures not already found in the Old or New Testaments has ever been unearthed, whereas large volumes of corroborating biblical archeology may readily be consulted. Not surprisingly, then, the basic plot of the Book of Mormon—of Israelites migrating to the New World, having Jesus appear to them in North America, and eventually warring with native Americans and dying off—does not feature nearly as prominently in LDS apologetic as does every Mormon’s personal testimony: the conviction they

BOOK REVIEW

Friendship at the Margins: Discovering Mutuality in Service and Mission

by Christopher L. Heuertz and Christine D. Pohl, InterVarsity Press, 2010.

Book Review by Carrie Graham

Carrie Graham is a pastor at Mosaic Austin in Austin, Texas. She received her Master of Divinity from Fuller Theological Seminary, and she is part of the founding board of Evangelical Interfaith Dialogue.

Christopher L. Heuertz and Christine D. Pohl's *Friendship at the Margins: Discovering Mutuality in Service and Mission* is part of a series of books released by Duke Divinity School Center for Reconciliation. The two authors represent full-time mission work and the theological academy, respectively. The series highlights the necessary connection between theology and praxis as we pursue richer lives as Christians through friendship.

The book explores friendship as central to the meaning of reconciliation and mission, and does so largely through stories about long-term overseas mission efforts conducted by Heuertz's organization, Word Made Flesh. These stories most often involve missionaries working with impoverished groups of people, who so often fall victim to disturbing social injustices.

Heuertz and Pohl do a nearly seamless job interweaving their stories and corresponding theological analysis, guiding the reader through a thoughtful process of considering friendship as central to reconciliation and mission.

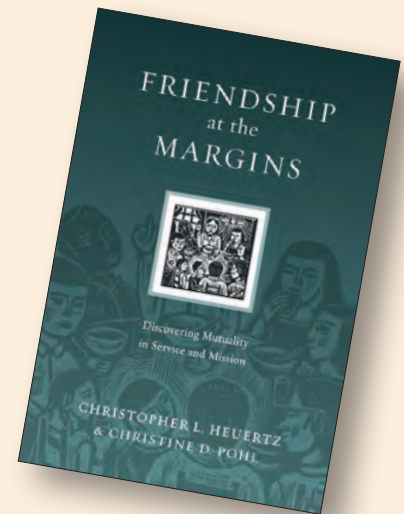
There are a few key assumptions built on in this work that help develop friendship as central to mission and reconciliation. First, reconciliation with God is something for which everyone is made. Secondly, relationships are reciprocal (33). An additional assumption is that friendship moves us into a richer place for ministry, rather than a watered-down one. In other words, ministry is better when it is not simply a duty-driven enterprise (103). As the basic idea is explained more fully via stories, the authors move forward into a more in-depth consideration of the implications that our actions can have if friendship is at the center of both reconciliation and mission.

The authors cite friendship not as

a helpful part of mission, but rather its defining quality. Implications of this seemingly stringent definition immediately necessitate new measures of success. If friendship as we understand it in our daily lives is also the goal of mission, and since the book poses strategy as a conflicting interest to the love exercised in friendship, then measures of success in mission must be shifted altogether. Heuertz and Pohl's recommendation for measurement, then, is not conversion but *faithfulness*—or perhaps how well one does at centering the love of God around all decisions and relationships. While this is an ambiguous alternative, one might suspect that this is precisely the intention.

The book is unafraid of the tension that this faithfulness through friendship requires. In fact, there is an entire chapter encouraging those practicing mission to achieve the spiritual maturity required for one to live as a believer in the midst of ambiguity. Heuertz and Pohl essentially propose that we not depend on categories that work God out of his job. That is to say, as in friendship with those most like us, pursuing mission as friendship with the "other" means letting go of any control or sovereignty we presume to have. It means becoming vulnerable to the "other," as does happen in good friendships, as we seek to give up our own power in favor of experiencing the trust, the learning, the genuine sharing that occurs in friendship. It also means being prepared to experience tensions involved with loving the "other" fully and without condition.

In this exploration of friendship's connection to mission, Heuertz and Pohl provide insights that can be helpful for interfaith dialogue. One should not mistake the book's intent as primarily meant for dialogue, but for reconciliation and mission



as a broad concept. One of the book's few shortcomings is that in favor of developing the friendship-as-mission concept in a focused fashion, the majority of the stories are within a more narrow scope of mission. However, the way that Heuertz and Pohl build their framework for mission makes way for consideration of its implication in innumerable contexts that may be deemed as missional. Thus, this work pertains to interfaith dialogue insofar as it can also be understood as mission. One may easily read this book seeking to understand how our approaches to dialogue might benefit from Heuertz and Pohl's insights on the foundation of friendship in mission.

Friendship at the Margins offers helpful focus, theology, and stories of how mission and reconciliation are most properly centered around friendship. The concept is simple but nuanced enough in its persuasion to communicate the powerful shift in behavior this may create for any pursuit considered missional. Whether it is working toward social justice in a Third World country, or having a dialogue with Jewish and Muslim colleagues, Heuertz and Pohl create insightful paths that are, at the least, worth considering for how we might experience God's presence in the approach. The curiosity this book induces might be enough for readers to experiment with friendship as central to mission and reconciliation. May God honor those moved to respond in action. EIFD

Mission to Religions in the “Post-Edinburghs” World

by Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen



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Although not good English, the plural in the title of this reflection, “Edinburghs,” draws our attention to the significant ways in which both the original meeting in 1910 and its centennial have helped and inspired the worldwide Christian Church to tackle interfaith issues and dialogue with the religious “other.”

The first Edinburgh clearly stood on the basis of the “fulfillment theory” of religions, as the following quotation indicates: “We can see how the whole Apostolic view grew out of the twofold endeavor of those first missionaries of the Church to meet what was deep and true in the other religions, and to guard against the perils which arose from the spell which these earlier religions still cast upon the minds of those who had been delivered from them into the larger life of the Gospel.”¹ Simply put, fulfillment theory held that the Christian gospel fulfilled those seeds of truth that were *present but obscured* in other religions. Somewhat ironically—in light of the fact that the 1910 meeting did not have any Roman Catholics in attendance—Vatican II’s view of religions as expounded particularly in its *Nostra Aetate* (“Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions”) adopted this view and made it a leading theological theme.

Between the two Edinburghs much has happened in the world and in the Church’s appraisal of religions. Religious plurality, and as a consequence various types of religious pluralisms (again, in the plural, since there are many types of “-isms” in this regard), has become part of our everyday life not only in the “mission lands” but even “here at home.” Christian theology has also picked up the task of theological reflection on the role of religions and the importance, conditions, and challenges of interfaith dialogue. Even beyond that, in recent years, comparative theology—an attempt to complement the more abstract approach of the theology of religions with specific investigations into topics and themes between religions such as, say, Christian, Muslim, and Hindu views of Jesus or revelation—has become an important and fruitful task.

All of these recent developments, as well as the changing foci and emphases of the ecumenical movement’s relation to religions and interfaith issues, formed the background of the Theme II of the Edinburgh 2010 conference. What I mean by changing foci and emphases is the fact that in the 1960s and 1970s, it appeared that the World Council of Churches (WCC) would “go left” towards relativism on interfaith issues and end up frustrating the whole idea of mission to peoples of other faiths. That didn’t happen. Beginning in the 1980s, the approach of the WCC has been more mainstream and balanced, and so both the missions department and the interfaith department have found their

justification. Particularly in the 2005 World Conference on Evangelization and Mission (in the preparatory work for which I served for seven years, including participation in the two-week meeting), there has been a closer relationship between mission work and interfaith issues.

The main concern and opportunity of the 2010 meeting rested not surprisingly on the issue of how to do mission in a deeply pluralistic world. Along with religious pluralism, issues of multi-ethnicity, multiculturalism, urbanization, and radical changes in information technology and virtual realities occupied the minds of the Theme II participants. Much time was also devoted to the multifaceted question of the relation of witness and evangelization to dialogue.

The composition of the Edinburgh 2010 meeting, with participants from all over the world, in contrast to almost exclusively Western countries of the 1910 gathering, and from all Christian churches, rather than only Protestant, made the discussion of any topic both richer and more challenging. What was also significant is that the facilitating group of the Theme II actively reached out to Evangelical and Pentecostal contributors. Rather than trying to artificially reconcile the differences, let alone eliminate the diversity of viewpoints, both the tentative report² and the forthcoming special study on interfaith issues³ make room for different types of Christian attitudes.

If the fulfillment model was the defining characteristic of the 1910 meeting, then “dialogical mission” or “missional dialogue”—if these neo-logisms are allowed—best define the 2010 approach:

Dialogue is a *basic way of life* because Christians share life and contexts with neighbours of other faiths. This implies that they establish dialogical relations so that there is hope of mutual understanding and fruitful co-existence in multi-religious and pluralistic societies. . . . Dialogue is no [sic] a substitute for mission or a hidden form of mission. Mission and dialogue are not identical, neither are they so opposed to one another. One can be committed to dialogue and to Christian witness at the same time.⁴ EIFD

Endnotes

- 1 World Missionary Conference, Edinburgh 1910, *Report of the Commission IV: The Missionary Message in Relation to Non-Christian Religions* (Edinburgh & London: Oliphant, Anderson, & Ferrier, 1910), 6.
- 2 “Theme Two: Christian Mission among Other Faiths,” in *Edinburgh 2010*, vol. 2: *Witnessing to Christ Today*, ed. Daryl Balia and Kirsteen Kim (Oxford, UK: Regnum, 2010), 34–60.
- 3 *Christian Mission among Other Faiths*, ed. Lalsingkima Pachuau and Knud Jørgensen, Edinburgh 2010 Studies (London, UK: Regnum, 2011, forthcoming).
- 4 “Theme Two: Christian Mission among Other Faiths,” 47.

A Very Brief History of the Lausanne Movement

by Donald Westbrook



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The Spring 2010 issue of this journal featured a short article by Matthew Krabill that explored the history and interfaith implications of the seminal Edinburgh Missionary Conference of 1910. That article was both timely and prescient given two important events this year: the one hundredth anniversary of this significant missiological (and ecumenical) conference, and the holding of a centennial conference, “Edinburgh 2010,” to commemorate the original gathering and reexamine our common call to mission.

This short article has a similar aim in light of this year’s Third Lausanne Congress on World Evangelization, which was held October 16-25 in Cape Town, South Africa. The “Lausanne Movement,” as it is called, is traditionally dated to the 1974 International Congress on World Evangelization held in Lausanne, Switzerland, where over 2,700 participants and guests from 150 countries gathered to discuss and promote the cause of worldwide evangelism. This is technically correct but, as one might suspect, considerable planning and preparation went into the 1974 meeting, and it was in fact pre-dated by a conference with similar goals held eight years earlier: the 1966 World Congress of Evangelism in Berlin, cosponsored by the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association and *Christianity Today*. The 1974 meeting was spearheaded by Billy Graham, John Stott, and others, and did much to transcend denominational affiliation and encourage worldwide collaboration toward the common cause of global evangelization.

The Lausanne Movement’s slogan, “The Whole Church taking the Whole Gospel to the Whole World,” suggests that modern evangelical efforts have been aided by the rise of ecumenism and globalization, and this certainly seems to be the case. On the other hand, it must be kept in mind that large-scale modern (and postmodern) evangelism does not trace back to Switzerland in 1974 or Scotland in 1910 but, as the gospel writers should continually remind us, to the divine mandate in the New Testament:

And Jesus came and said to them, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you.

And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.” (Matt. 28:16-20; cf. Mark 16:15-18)

The organizers and participants of the 1974 Lausanne meeting clearly kept the “Great Commission” in mind when they drafted the Lausanne Covenant, which embodies the dual sense of servant leadership and global evangelism that has guided the movement since. But given that one of the purposes of this journal is to ground interfaith dialogue in the context of the mission of God (*missio Dei*), perhaps the message and purpose of the Lausanne Movement should engender questions relevant to encountering the religious other. Such questions might include the following:

1. If we think about “evangelism” in the broader context of “mission,” what exactly is the function of interfaith dialogue in such a mission? Does dialogue take place for the sake of mutual and cross-cultural understanding, or is it little more than a covert evangelistic tactic?
2. If the challenge of Evangelical interfaith dialogue is, as Richard Mouw has suggested,¹ to preserve theological orthodoxy without succumbing to relativistic pluralism, and to transcend the polarization between “evangelism” and “dialogue” in the interest of complementarity, then how might we integrate the biblical call for evangelism with a call for dialogue?
3. Can dialogue, in and of itself, make space for God’s grace? When we dialogue with friends and colleagues in Jewish, Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist, Sikh, Jain, Baha’i, Zoroastrian, and other communities, is it possible that these encounters themselves make room for the mysterious and saving grace of God?

The Lausanne Covenant reminds us of the nonnegotiable and public commitment of Evangelicals to the “uniqueness and universality of Christ” (section 3), but the covenant also reminds us that, in the final analysis, God is the real actor who brings salvation to the world. “Worldwide evangelization,” as section 14 of the covenant reads, “will become a realistic possibility only when the Spirit renews the Church in truth and wisdom, faith, holiness, love and power.” It is as agents in the world on behalf of God that we “Go into all the world and proclaim the good news to the whole creation” (Mark 16:15). The same theocentric perspective must be kept in mind as Evangelicals engage in interfaith dialogue, especially as we come to more fully understand and appreciate this exchange as a theologically significant dimension of the *missio Dei*.

Read more at www.lausanne.org. EIFD

Endnotes

- 1 See Richard J. Mouw, “Convicted Civility and Interfaith Dialogue,” *Evangelical Interfaith Dialogue* 1, no. 3 (2010): 5-7.

Praxis: Joshua Muthalali

Is “Pentecostal Interfaith Dialogue” an Oxymoron?



Joshua Muthalali is a first year Master of Divinity student at Fuller Theological Seminary. Joshua grew up in the Indian Pentecostal movement and currently attends an Indian Pentecostal church in Norwalk, California. He serves as a youth pastor intern and is involved in bringing interfaith dialogue to his local church.

Everyone who does not abide in the teaching of Christ, but goes beyond it, does not have God; whoever abides in the teaching has both the Father and the Son. *Do not receive into the house or welcome anyone who comes to you and does not bring this teaching; for to welcome is to participate in the evil deeds of such a person.*

2 John 9-11 (NRSV)

This was the chapter and verse shot back at me by a prominent church member in our Bible study group (composed mainly of Keralite Pentecostal Christians who have their roots in the state of Kerala, India) in response to my introduction to a new topic of study: how to respond and interact with people of other faiths from a Christian perspective. This response, coming so early in our discussion, demanded a strong rationale for my proposed topic of study. For, if the Scripture gave the imperative that one ought not to receive or welcome a person who did not acknowledge “the teaching of Christ,” then what was the value of interacting or building relationships with persons of other faiths? What could be gained from studying other religions and dialoguing with someone from another faith whom the same chapter calls a “deceiver” and “antichrist”?

While the academy breaks new ground and reaches new frontiers in interfaith dialogue (IFD), in my observation, many Christians, especially in the Pentecostal tradition, have not been convinced of the value, much less the need, for such an exercise. In comparison with other Christian traditions, Pentecostals have not been the greatest of interfaith dialoguers. Tony Richie, a Pentecostal academician, describes the religious interactions in Pentecostalism as taking the form of “self-centered psychosis that alienates itself from any realities of divine presence beyond its own borders.” This has often resulted in the movement “ostracizing itself,” while “demonizing” the other.¹ It is a stance that has been unproductive for the calling of being a witness of the Truth in a religiously diverse world. And IFD offers a very appropriate means by which the Church can be present incarnationally with the world in its everyday life. So, as a Pentecostal Christian and a student, and as a person enthused to be a witness for God, I have had a growing desire to transfer an appreciation for IFD to the church and help

develop an appropriate methodology for the task.

One of the important lessons I have learned in the task of involving the body of Christ in IFD is the need to discern the role and extent to which the church, especially the laity, should participate in such dialogues. As seen above, verses like 2 John 9-11 have often been used, with good reasons, to discourage dialogue or limit interaction with persons of other faiths. However, the author of 2 John was surely not hoping to create an inhospitable community of believers with his harsh imperatives. Rather, the author most likely was prescribing these cautious measures to ensure that the fledgling church would not be deceived and led astray by false teaching. Consequently, from studying 2 John, it is understood that although ideally IFD could be possible if all believers were rooted and grounded in the Christian faith, it should be left to the more spiritually mature believers, due to the often deficient biblical and theological grounding of Christians. However, this does not excuse the less mature from becoming more theologically informed. In fact, it would greatly profit the church if the less mature were equipped and trained to be effective dialoguers.

A related and necessary step is the need to tease out the reason(s) for the deficiency in theological understanding. For instance, in the Pentecostal tradition, the deficiency often stems from the movement’s tendency to overemphasize the spiritual or emotional aspects of the faith, at the expense of neglecting the intellectual or rational aspects. This deficit has not only affected biblical understanding, but has also influenced many Pentecostals’ implicit theology of religions. As Richie relates, it is a theology that “recognizes that diabolical or demonic forces often deign to use religion—any religion, all religions—for perverse purposes.”² Pentecostals, and particularly Keralite Pentecostals, often adopt an attitude along the lines of “everything we touch is subject to possible contamination or infection [by the demonic] and therefore is suspect.” Although these are legitimate fears, most often the fear comes from the lack of knowledge about the religious other and an inadequate theology of religions. To correct this, the Christian ought to commit to learning about the religious other, most optimally by dialoguing with them.

Another step toward helping Pentecostals mature with regard to IFD is to cultivate a character of teachability. Amos Yong relates how the Pentecostal identity itself encourages one-way communication. He writes, “As an oral tradition Pentecostals have perennially emphasized the testimony, verbal and prophetic witness, and evangelistic proclamation.”³ Consequently, it is the ingrained default setting of Pentecostals to engage in monologue rather than

Ironically, one way to grow in understanding of the Christian doctrines is by studying what the religious other says.



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“...what you see and hear depends a good deal on where you are standing: it also depends on what sort of person you are.”
 - C. S. LEWIS

dialogue. Dayanand Bharati also diagnoses this propensity for one-way communication and attributes it to a “lack of teachability” on the part of the Christian.⁴ As a corrective, he calls for assuming a “spirit of Apollos,” that is, a willingness to listen and learn when engaging in dialogue as demonstrated in Acts 18.

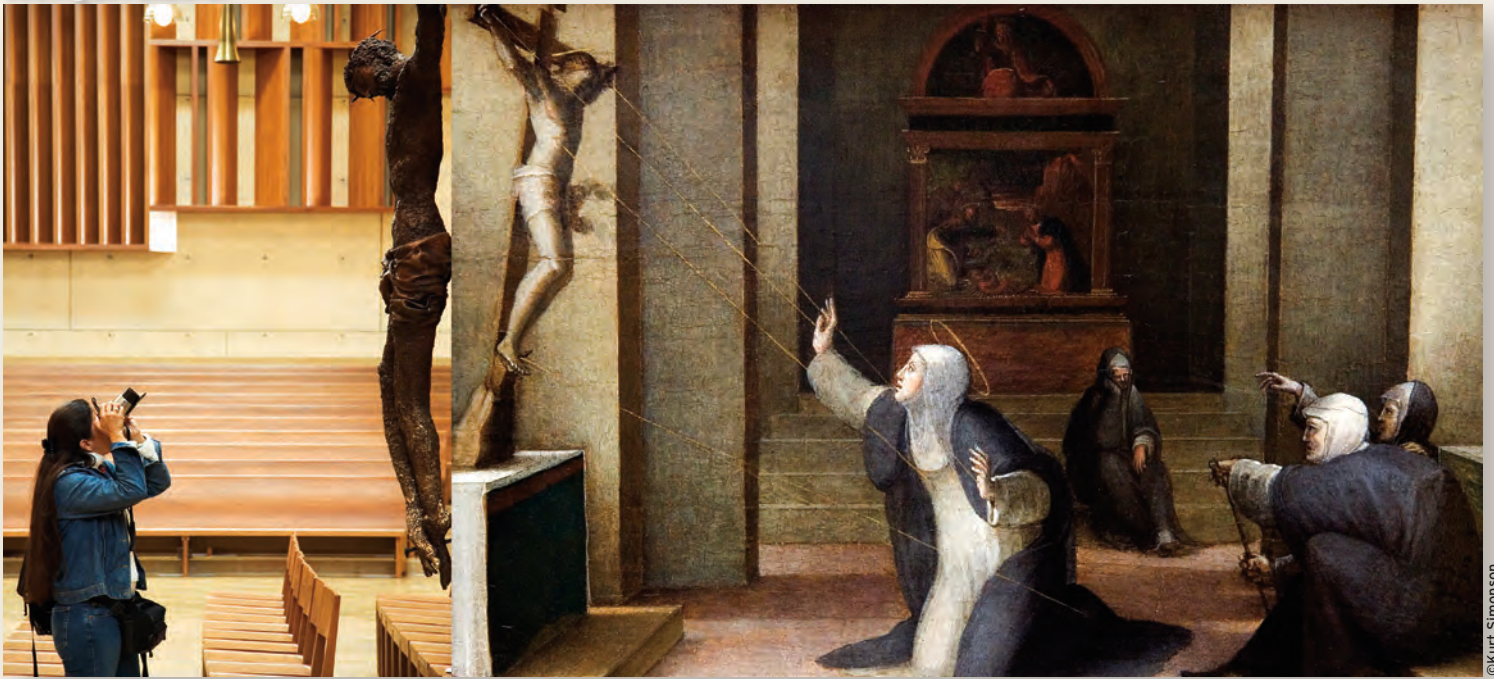
Lastly, it is important to set the expectations and motives for IFD and clear any misunderstandings about it. For instance, in 1893, the World’s Parliament of Religions held in Chicago, Illinois, initiated dialogue based on “late-nineteenth-century optimism about human progress and confidence in the possibility of universal human “brotherhood.”⁵ Although held with noble motives, that kind of dialogue can easily devolve into a relativistic pluralism and perpetuate a false sense of unity. Instead, true IFD recognizes that since, as finite and sinful humans, each side knows the Truth only in part, dialogue can refine our understanding of Truth.

Living in false reality and deception is dangerous. This is why the author of 2 John warned the fledgling church against opening themselves up to false teachings. However, if we as a church and particularly the Pentecostal movement fail to pursue a deeper knowledge of our own Christian faith, then we will be greatly susceptible to subscribing to false doctrines that arise in various disguises. Ironically, one way to grow in understanding of the Christian doctrines is by studying what the religious other says. In fact, we see historically that the beliefs of the church were better articulated

and understood when the Christian faith came in contact with heresies. This is why I chose to discuss this topic in our church’s Bible study. I encountered minor resistance and ambivalence by some at first—and still others were unsure of whether they could follow along—yet we agreed to proceed with the study, and thus far I have received positive feedback. We hope to continue learning and use this increased understanding to engage in dialogue both formally and informally in our daily interactions with this pluralistic and spiritually diverse world. I pray that both we, and the religious “others” we know, will draw nearer to God by the Spirit through Jesus Christ, the Truth. EIFD

Endnotes

- 1 Tony Richie, “Neither Naïve nor Narrow: A Balanced Pentecostal Approach to Christian Theology of Religions,” paper presented at the 2005 Annual Meeting of the *American Academy of Religion*, 2.
- 2 Ibid., 14.
- 3 Amos Yong, *Discerning the Spirit(s): A Pentecostal-Charismatic Contribution to Christian Theology of Religions* (London: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000), 186.
- 4 Dayanand Bharati, *Living Water and Indian Bowl: An Analysis of Christian Failings in Communicating Christ to Hindus, with Suggestions Toward Improvements* (Pasadena: William Carey Library, 2004), 32.
- 5 Kate McCarthy, *Interfaith Encounters in America* (Piscataway: Rutgers University Press, 2007), 16.



Kurt Simonson, *Untitled (Stigmata)*, 2007
archival inkjet print, 12"x26"

This image belongs to a body of work in which photographs of paintings with religious themes are juxtaposed in a diptych format with photographs taken of everyday life. The diptych format holds both images in a place of tension—the split, the fissure between the two images—is the location of a complex relationship. Some implied lines seem to cross, creating a visual unity, while other elements come to an abrupt end and force a wall between the two scenes. It is simultaneously a joint and a fracture, a site of “both/and” friction that intrigues our vision but frustrates our conceptions of what we perceive to be happening. At first, one may think that the “sacred” side of the diptych is meant to re-enchant the scenes of everyday life, but the mundane scene remains ridiculously banal against the weight of the sacred. Yet it’s not that easy—both seem to work in an exchange that infuses and informs the other. Jarring relationships spill over from one scene into the next, exposing and revealing bits of the sacred in the mundane and vice versa.

In *Untitled (Stigmata)*, the exchange seems to be hinting at issues of devotion and consumption. Is the Christ figure being lovingly venerated or simply used? Which woman in the scene (St. Catherine, or the tourist) is performing the act of adoration or consumption? Who is giving to whom and who is taking from whom in this image? The juxtaposition and opposition invites us into a dynamic of meditation on Christ, one that can lead to self-reflection about the complexity and mystery of our relationship to him.

To see other images in this body of work, and for information about the artist, visit www.kurtsimonson.com.

Untitled (Stigmata) by Kurt Simonson contains an appropriation of *Saint Catherine of Siena Receiving the Stigmata* by Domenico Beccafumi, 1513-1515, Italy, oil and gold on wood, from the collection of the J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles, California.

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