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Christ, the Word, the Light and the Message

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In reflecting on the World Mission from a Wesleyan perspective, the author explores theologically Christ as the living Word, the radiant Light and the Message incarnate in the messenger, who is universally active among all peoples and cultures. Christ is the One all have been searching for during many long centuries of religious quest. Yet all men and women by nature choose darkness rather than light. Mankind's only hope is in the grace of God in Christ and through the Holy Spirit. This prevenient grace is evidenced in the collective consciousness of each society and in the moral law found in all cultures. However, in his search for bridges between revelation through creation and in the Cross, the author is careful to avoid the errors of Pelagianism. For all seeking to witness in the cross-cultural plurality of the market place this article deserves careful consideration.

Editor

The Wesleyan tradition stands to offer an evangelical theology of mission which takes into serious and sympathetic account the cultural predicaments of human beings. And, while vitally concerned with the 'telling' of the gospel well, historically it has been as equally committed to the 'living' of the gospel. What follows intends to be a Wesleyan-oriented theological reflection upon the first verses of the Gospel of John in response to perennial issues presented by the world mission. The emphasis is, as it must be, centred on Christ. Light and Life are in the Word which has now become flesh in Jesus Christ. The Word links the salvific work of Christ to God's creation and to the evidences of Him in the world. The light shines upon every man and woman in the world, yet it seems as if there are only dim flickerings of light in the midst of overwhelming darkness. So a John the Baptist is needed—a messenger proclaiming the Message. [p. 11](#)

I. THE WORD AND THE WORLD

From God's creation which surrounds human beings, there is some evidence of the Word which made it all. Christian faith has largely considered the world itself as a means toward the knowledge of God and has affirmed that God is able to work through physical forms and symbols. Both the creation account of Genesis and the prologue of John affirm that God wants to make himself known in and through the world, not in spite of it. This is why Jesus, the Word of God, could have taken on human, physical form without taking on sin and evil. Christ himself was there in the beginning, creating order out of chaos; and because he was there he can be the Redeemer of all creation—he can be here. (This is why Christian faith can find such benefit in the sacraments: God's presence can be known through the material—through the bread and the wine of the Lord's Supper).¹ Asian Christians understand this well, that God is seen in what he has created, and that though

¹ Albert C. Outler, *Evangelism in the Wesleyan Spirit* (Nashville: Tidings, 1971), 52; Ole E. Borgen, *John Wesley on the Sacraments: A Theological Study* (Reprint, Grand Rapids: Francis Asbury Press, Zondervan, 1985), 95.

nature is not to be worshipped, it is to be treated with reverence.² Through the Word active in creation even those not privy to the stream of revelation flowing in the Hebrews' history of salvation are enabled by grace to perceive something of God. It is a knowledge limited by sin but grace is there sufficiently, so that at least men and women know that God exists and that he is powerful and are without excuse if they choose not to believe in him (see [Romans 1:20](#)).

Christ responds to the religious quest

If, then, there is partial revelation in all creation because the Word has made it, as proclaimers of the gospel Christians must be sensitive to how the Word has already been at work. Even before Christians arrive with the full proclamation, the Word, the 'hidden Christ',³ has already manifested himself to all people and cultures. Messengers of him fulfill [p. 12](#) the task, saying, 'Here he is, the one whom you have intuitively known. His name is Jesus of Nazareth and he has come to save you from sin'.⁴ That name is proclaimed in order to enable individuals to have faith in him, to know the one who is the subject of their highest longings and deepest yearnings. He is Jesus, the hope not only of the Jews but of the Gentiles—the Indians, the Chinese, the Africans. He is the One *all* have been searching for during many long centuries of religious quest. This is the one so long waited for; here is the long-expected Jesus.⁵

The second and third century apologists appreciated the human search for truth, seeing Greek philosophy not only as human wisdom, but also as paving the way for the hearing of the gospel by Gentiles, similar to that way in which the law served as preparation for the Hebrews. Indeed the Logos was to them a key concept bridging religious philosophies. They would have said also that Hindu and other sacred writings, many antedating Christ, evidence some prevenient work of the Word and would have seen them as preparatory to Christ in a limited way. In these scriptures are signs of God's voice. Christians living in cultures affected deeply by sacred writings must treat the texts

² See, e.g., Chung-Choon Kim, 'Toward a Christian Theology of Man in Nature', in *The Human and the Holy: Asian Perspectives in Christian Theology*, eds. Emerito P. Nacpil and Douglas J. Elwood (Quezon City: New Day, 1978), 89–130.

³ The phrase is used by Lycurgus M. Starkey, Jr., *The Work of the Holy Spirit: A Study in Wesleyan Theology* (New York: Abingdon, 1962), 43, in describing the preliminary work of the Holy Spirit as a divine gift to all, attempting to lead all to Christ.

⁴ See Albert C. Outler, *Evangelism in the Wesleyan Spirit*, 45–46. See also John T. Seamands: 'God's Holy Spirit is working ... among people who have never heard the name of Jesus', thus 'preparing individuals and even ethnic groups for the coming of the Christian messenger'. *Tell It Well: Communicating the Gospel Across the Cultures* (Kansas City: Beacon Hill Press, 1981), 117.

⁵ George A. Lindbeck remarks that this seems arrogant: to suppose that 'Christians know what non-believers experience and believe in the depths of their beings better than they know themselves'? (*The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Post-liberal Age* [Philadelphia: Westminster, 1984], 61). The messengers of the gospel have received their knowledge of its mysteries by the grace of revelation, which means, in Lindbeck's terms, by standing within the Christian cultural-linguistic tradition. Since it is by grace alone there must be humility. But there must also be boldness since there is implicit in the very nature of Christianity a faith in its ultimacy. That is, to be Christian is to believe in Christ's uniqueness and finality. The invitation to non-Christians, as Lindbeck rightly says, is to enter into the language stories and paradigms of the Christian community. What reason would there be either for the invitation or for its acceptance than that Christ and faith in him is perceived by both the inviter and the receptor as God's means of salvation in the World? (*Ibid.*, 129–132).

with dignity in order to understand both p. 13 how God already has been speaking and how to proclaim the gospel more effectively.⁷

However, the scriptures of other religions cannot be substituted for the Old Testament. Indeed all Gentiles had either written or oral stories of their gods. But now Gentiles have been incorporated into the long stream of tradition which makes them heir to God's revelation to the Hebrews.⁸ Though scandalous in its particularity—unacceptably so to many Hindus—Christians affirm that Jesus Christ, born at a certain time in a certain place to a certain people, the Hebrews, is the Universal Saviour.⁹ Christians can say in definitive ways how God revealed himself to the Hebrews because of the Revelation of God in Christ. God spoke, Christians affirm, in a final, ultimate way in Christ, and through him men and women look backward in history to his prophets and to his law. No one can say in ways just as certain or definite how God revealed himself among the Chinese, for instance. However, there may be some idea as to how God has spoken to other people comparing their cultural traits to the Word of his full revelation in Christ.

The particularity of Christ is not incidental to the gospel, but central to it. If Christ did not come at a moment in historical time as a human being there could be no hope of mortal men and women being redeemed in historical time. Christians affirm that he truly 'suffered under Pontius Pilate'. This fixes both the agony and the historicity of his coming, so that Christians may know that they may triumph with him as men and women in the time and place in which they live.

Prevenient grace in conscience and law

The Word at work in the world is, in Wesleyan terms, an aspect of prevenient grace. If God's grace is not limited to the community of the Book, or to some hidden elect, but is given to all, how is it at work among those outside the manifest household of God? For Wesley, p. 14 even persons outside the flow of revelation possess both conscience and law, both of which are written by the 'finger of God' on their hearts. Though when Adam broke God's command, darkened understanding ensued, God as a divine gift 'in some measure reinscribed the law on the heart of this dark, sinful creature'. So 'the law of God is now made known to them that know not God'. Wesley asserts that God works among those who do not know him by name through the law and that there is a gracious restoration of the moral image of God lost in the Fall. The restoration of the 'law' meant to Wesley that God was revealing something of his own 'heart', that he had not shut off either compassion or knowledge of himself from the lost.¹⁰ For Wesley the law functioned

⁷ Jaroslav Pelikan, *Through the Centuries: His Place in the History of Culture* (New York: Harper and Row, 1985), 34–35. See also the suggestion of A. C. Bouquet that the Logos is evident in the sages of world religions; 'Revelation and the Divine Logos', in Gerald H. Anderson, ed., *The Theology of the Christian Mission* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1961), 183–198. Cf. the more extreme implications of the hidden work of Christ in other religions in Raimundo Pannikar, *The Unknown Christ of Hinduism: Towards an Ecumenical Christophany*, rev. ed. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1981), 48–61.

⁸ H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Meaning of Revelation* (New York: Macmillan, 1941), 44–54.

⁹ Cf. Raimundo Panikkar, *The Unknown Christ of Hinduism*, 45–48.

¹⁰ John Wesley, 'The Original Nature, Properties, and Use of the Law', *The Works of John Wesley*, vol. 2, ed. Albert C. Outler (Nashville: Abingdon, 1985), 7–10, 15. Also, Wesley, 'The Witness of Our Own Spirit', *Works*, vol. 1, ed. Albert C. Outler, 302. For comments on the partial restoration of the law to human conscience after the fall see John Deschner, *Wesley's Christology: An Interpretation* (Reprint, Grand Rapids: Francis Asbury Press, Zondervan, 1988), 97–98; 104–105; S. W. Ariarajah, 'Evangelism and Wesley's Catholicity of Grace,' in *The Future of the Methodist Theological Traditions*, ed. M. Douglas Meeks (Nashville: Abingdon, 1985), 142–44; and, especially, Kenneth J. Collins, Wesley's Platonic Conception of the Moral Law', *Wesleyan*

through the Holy Spirit to convince the world of sin, to bring individuals toward Christ, and to keep believers alive in the life of God. That there was reason and order in the world, and that law preserved it, was evident to all—even to those apart from revelation. Preventive grace also enabled individuals to keep the law, so that everyone was accountable for the moral insight received. No one, not even non-Christians, have any excuse for sinning; but everyone has sinned.¹¹

Social laws apart from the revealed commandments are both God's doing, this is to say, and the result of the collective conscience of society. Social laws do not in themselves perfectly replicate the mind of God, of course. They are used by God to provide the structures by which human beings come to know themselves as lawless or sinful ([Romans 7:7](#)). The socialization process within human beings is never completed and individuals continually feel imposed upon by the society in which they live. Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann suggest that though an individual may abide by all the laws, there remains 'a struggle between a "higher" and a "lower" self'. The law seems alien to one's inward nature, and this tension between self and society persists throughout life. Societies, like persons, are not prone to perfectly fulfil God's intent. As Reinhold Niebuhr rightly assesses, greed outweighs altruism even more tragically in societies than within individuals.¹² Despite the merely relative moral character of social laws, despite the fact that the Word is only partly their creator, God uses social laws to constrain both chaos and sin, and to reveal the anomic character of human nature. So 'law' in itself is good. 'Society', in Wesleyan thought, it seems to me, emerges between the matrices of human sin and the Word of God in the world. The laws of societies may be righteous, partly righteous or unrighteous, depending on how the Word has been accepted or rejected over time.

When full revelation comes it brings the moral code as from above. The Ten Commandments and their fulfillment in the teachings of Christ, since these are revealed in the Word, serve as the standard to judge all social laws. To Christians who accept it, the Bible provides an objective base which prevents, hopefully, the anarchy of complete moral relativism. Individuals participate in the revelation by standing within a community, the church, which is devoted to demonstrating a kingdom ethic as well as to the Word which is beyond culture.¹³

The law would require complete complicity. The human will is bent toward sin. Without the Word spoken and without the community of Christ guiding and encouraging individuals there is little hope for salvation. Without faith in Christ the Holy Spirit's activity within human beings remains limited.

The Word is active even before becoming verbal or spoken, since it was from the beginning and always has been involved in the coming to be of all that exists. If God is at

Theological Journal 21 (Spring-Fall 1986), 118–122. Perhaps from his experience with the Indians in America during his missionary days Wesley sensed that non-Christians know what is morally right while at the same time fail to do what is right. For that reason Wesley offered them the Book. But they rejected it and to the end of his life Wesley was burdened for their salvation. See Wesley to France Asbury, November 25, 1878, in *The Letters of the Rev. John Wesley A.M.*, 8 vols., ed. John Telford (London: Epworth, 1931), 8.24–25; *The Works of John Wesley*, vol. 18, ed. W. Reginald Ward and Richard P. Heitzenrater (Nashville: Abingdon, 1988), 163–164; Martin Schmidt, *The Young Wesley: Missionary and Theologian of Missions* (London: Epworth, 1958), 33–34.

¹¹ *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, Anchor Books, 1966), 183.

¹² Reinhold Niebuhr, *Moral Man and Immoral Society: A Study in Ethics and Politics* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1932), 9, 91, 262, 272.

¹³ Cf. H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Meaning of Revelation*, 114–128.

work among people there is a point of [p. 16](#) contact between God and persons prior to their conversion.¹⁴ Wesleyan thought, it seems to me, agrees with Karl Rahner that 'It would be wrong to regard the pagan as someone who has not yet been touched by God's grace and truth'.¹⁵ Theologian H. Ray Dunning similarly suggests that:¹⁶

The Wesleyan approach is to recognize that whatever truth may be found in other religions is the result of the activity of prevenient grace in its revelatory function. The missionary can gratefully accept such truth and use it as a point of contact to demonstrate the fulfillment of those glimmers of truth by the fuller revelation in Christ.

Theologically, this view prevents deism, the idea that God is removed from what he has created or set in motion. The purpose of God's prevenient witness, then, is not only to preserve order but to enable response to his initiative. From the very beginning the aim of God has been both to more perfectly reveal himself and his nature, and to establish close, even personal relationship with human beings. Though Christians find meaning in the story of God's work of salvation among the Hebrews, his activity among other people must not be denied.

Perhaps there are ones who are enabled by the Word working through the creation to know God. If there is such knowledge it is because of grace flowing from Christ and it requires individuals so receiving this gift of God to contrast it with the society surrounding them. Likely, it will force them to act against the false religious forms of their culture and to live ethically beyond and apart from the [p. 17](#) community into which they are born.¹⁷ Because of the Word alive in the consciousness of individuals, some might believe in an unknown, unnamed God ([Acts 17:23](#)). If faith arises through the Word spoken only in creation to the minds of individuals it is no less Christocentric, since the gospel readily affirms that the Word there in the beginning, and no other, became enfleshed in Jesus. Hence, if some are enabled to place their faith in God, beyond the god of their culture religion, it is because God through Christ has spoken, and draws them—even these—to himself. There is no other way but through Christ for men and women to be saved, but specific knowledge of the incarnate name of that Word waits for either the

¹⁴ See J. Kenneth Grider, 'Prevenient Grace and Evangelism', *Herald of Holiness* 75 (August 1, 1986), 14; Lycurgus W. Starkey, Jr., *The Work of the Holy Spirit* 133; George G. Hunter, *To Spread the Power: Church Growth in the Wesleyan Spirit* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1987), 72. The Evangelical Methodist Church in Bolivia asserts that 'the church must be aware that Christ *precedes* us in evangelism. God has not left himself without a witness ... The grace of God is not confined to the Church'. In Mortimer Arias, 'That the World May Believe', in *Mission Trends* No. 3, eds. Gerald H. Anderson and Thomas F. Stransky (New York: Paulist Press, 1976), 95.

¹⁵ Karl Rahner, 'Christianity and the Non-Christian Religions', in *Christianity and Other Religions*, eds. John Hick and Brian Hebblethwaite (Glasgow: Collins, 1980), 75. Rahner is very close in this essay to Wesley's doctrine of prevenient grace, yet does not distinguish it sufficiently from saving grace. See also George A. Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine*, 57, in which there is criticism of Rahner's view that there may be 'anonymous Christians'.

¹⁶ H. Ray Dunning, *Grace, Faith and Holiness: A Wesleyan Systematic Theology* (Kansas City: Beacon Hill, 1988), 166.

¹⁷ For a classic statement regarding the tensions between the individual and society, which yet indicates that such abnormality would be possible, see Ruth Benedict, *Patterns of Culture* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1934), 251–278.

clear proclamation of the Word through messengers, of whom John the Baptist is the prototype, or for the final judgement.¹⁸

Rather than finding it easy to worship the Creator, men and women despair and worship the world instead, making images of mortal beings, birds, animals and reptiles ([Romans 1:23](#)). Though individuals aspire toward the divine, they freely prefer what their own hands have [p. 18](#) made. The religious forms of humankind evidence this religious pride that human efforts can reach the Creator, find knowledge of him, and thus secure salvation. The gospel says a loud 'NO' to this. Men and women are not saved by such works but only by faith in the God who is beyond any puny efforts to confine him. Human beings cannot grasp him; he grasps them and pulls them out of their own morass of ignorance and evil.¹⁹

II. LIGHT AND LIFE

The light of Christ has shone and is shining today in some way to every person in every culture (see [John 1:9](#)), and the task of each Christian is to proclaim the Life so that there might be understanding, illumination, and perchance reception of the Life. Christians must find how the light has already been shining and explain more perfectly the way of salvation through Jesus Christ so that, through grace, faith may arise. Prevenient grace is working. There is a radiance from the Light sufficient to account for impulses in the religions and cultures of the world which seem to be in some accord with Revelation, for, as John V. Taylor says, 'God has nowhere left himself without a witness that always, to a greater or lesser degree, points to Christ'.²⁰ Wherever there is congruity it comes by grace and is designed by God to serve as preparation for the gospel.

From the pulsating life within human beings who desire what is good and the numinously holy, there is evidence of God shining in the world. Even though individuals, due to sin, are not able to attain their ideals, there are still visions, and aspirations which

¹⁸ Lycurgus Starkey remarks that 'that possibility of an extra-scriptural redemption is implicit' in some of Wesley's statements, though generally 'inconsistent' with his emphases on Christ's atoning work. *The Work of the Holy Spirit*, 43. Wesley said: 'Whenever I see a thousand men running into hell, be it in England, Ireland, or France, yea, in Europe, Asia, Africa or America. I will stop them if I can'. *The Works of John Wesley*, vol. 26, ed. Frank Baker (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1982), 291; and in his 1738 sermon 'Salvation by Faith' Wesley slated clearly that saving faith must be explicitly in Christ. *The Works of John Wesley*, vol. 1 ed. Albert C. Outler, 120. However, Wesley also acknowledged that it was not needful for a person to have an understanding of justification by faith, or any other doctrine, in order to be saved: 'He that feareth God, and worketh righteousness is accepted with him'. *The Works of John Wesley*, 3rd ed., vol. 3 (Reprint, Kansas city: Beacon Hill Press, 1979), 308, or, to put it another way, one might possess the faith of a servant without either the assurances or the joys of sonship. Though Wesley applied this to himself prior to Aldersgate, and to other nominal Christians, might the concept have relevancy to those in other religions who have faith without knowledge of the Son? In one of his later sermons, 'On Faith', Wesley remarked that Moslems were to be more pitied than blamed for the 'narrowness' of their faith, and that those who have not had the privilege of the Word will be judged according to the light they have received. Wesley's definition of true faith is then stated broadly as 'a divine conviction of God and of the things of God'. Furthermore, he said, 'whosoever in every nation believes thus far, the Apostle [[Acts 10:35](#)] declares, is accepted by Him'. It is the faith of a servant rather than that of a son. *The Works of John Wesley*, vol. 3, ed. Albert C. Outler, 494, 497. See also Robert G. Tuttle, *John Wesley: His Life and Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1979), 315-316; A. Skevington Wood, *The Burning Heart; John Wesley: Evangelist* (Reprint, Minneapolis: Bethany House, 1978), 243-244.

¹⁹ See Karl Barth, 'The Revelation of God as the Abolition of Religion', in Hick and Hebblethwaite, eds., *Christianity and Other Religions*, 32-51.

²⁰ John V. Taylor, *The Go-Between God*, 181.

inspire religion. Amid an existentially evil world there is a desire for transcendence in the human soul.

All choose darkness rather than light

Because of the prevenient work of the Light within human beings there is an inner sense of right and wrong. There is a general illumination, as Leon Morris puts it, 'sufficient at least for them to be blameworthy when they have taken the wrong instead of the right way'.²¹ The p. 19 content of the ethical categories differs from culture to culture, but a sense of morality seems to be universal. Individuals intuit that there are changeless values in spite of the fact that the world is in flux. That there is in Wesleyan thought accountability along with this moral light implies both a capacity to know what is right and a power to do it. Neither this capacity nor this power is derived from natural ability. Human beings are far gone from the beings they were originally created to be and no longer possess freedom of will.²² Now all are born with a predisposition to sin, and that continually. If there is any capacity either to *know* the good or to *do* the good it must be God's grace.²³ Jesus himself comes, to use Augustine's words, as Light 'to infirm minds, wounded hearts, dim-eyed souls'.²⁴ The light of Jesus touches the blinded eyes of men and women even before they know who it is who is healing them. In every moral decision there is grace sufficient for human beings to choose the good, so that when men and women choose the bad and thereby succumb to their natural disposition, it is their own fault. One of the church fathers, Chrysostom, described this human accountability:²⁵

If some, deliberately closing the eyes of their minds, do not wish to receive the beams of this Light, darkness is theirs. This is not because of the Light, but is a result of the wickedness of men who deliberately deprive themselves of the gift. Grace has been poured forth upon all: not refused to Jew, Greek, barbarian, Scythian, free, slave, male, female, old, young. It is sent to all alike, and calls all with equal honour. And they who do not wish to enjoy this gift ought rightly to attribute their blindness to themselves. When the way is open to all, and there is no hindering, if some lovers of evil p. 20 remain outside, they are destroyed by nothing else than by their own wickedness alone.

Time and time again men and women choose darkness rather than light—to be children of darkness (see [Ephesians 5:8](#)). The tendency is universal.

²¹ Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to John* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1971), 95.

²² Regarding the loss of free agency, one Wesleyan creed states that through the fall of Adam, man 'became depraved so that he cannot now turn and prepare himself by his own natural strength and works to faith and calling upon God'. Article VII, *Manual*, Church of the Nazarene.

²³ See John Wesley, 'The Circumcision of the Heart', *Works*, vol. 1, ed. Albert C. Outler, 403; 'The Witness of Our Own Spirit', *ibid.*, 302; 'Free Grace', vol. 3, ed. Albert C. Outler, 553–554.

²⁴ Augustine, 'Lectures or Tractates on the Gospel According to St. John,' trans. James Innes, In *The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*, vol. 7, ed. Philip Schaff (Reprint, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans 1983) 15.

²⁵ John Chrysostom, 'Homilies on the Gospel of St. John', in *The Nicene and PostNicene Fathers of the Christian Church*, vol. 14, ed. Philip Schaff (Reprint, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983), 29. Martin Luther expressed the same sentiments. See *Luther's Works*, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan, vol. 22, trans. Martin H. Bertran (St. Louis: Concordia, 1957), 69. See also John Calvin: 'that the light shines in the darkness is not at all meant as praise of corrupt nature, but rather to deprive ignorance of excuse.' *Calvin's Commentaries: The Gospel According to St. John, 1–10*, eds. David W. Torrance and Thomas F. Torrance, trans. T. H. L. Parker (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1959). 12.

Pre-evangel, partially illuminating, prevenient grace is not saving grace, but Wesley saw it as being at one with the whole intent of God to bring men and women to repentance and spiritual life in Christ. To Wesley, prevenient grace goes before, reaching every person through the presence of the Holy Spirit from the moment of physical birth: no one 'living is without some prevenient grace, and every degree of grace is a degree of life'.²⁶ God's grace abounds to all. Though hindered by myriad factors from revealing God fully, and from bringing men and women to salvation, the Holy Spirit is active until there is some decisive willedness against him.²⁷

The missiological implications are clear. Not only are the children of Christians recipients of grace, but every child is, whether born into Hindu or Shamanist, or into irreligious environments. Perhaps certain individuals will live their entire lives without hearing of Christ, without knowing that a Holy Spirit is given, without knowing of the heavenly p. 21 Father. Even that does not defeat the grace of God. He works within the person, drawing gently to himself, wooing ever closer.

The Holy Spirit at work in culture

The Holy Spirit is at work, it seems to me, through culture and directly to individuals, through their consciences. An individual's conscience is not the product of cultural values alone. If it were, there would be no chance for individuals to transcend social conventions and mores. At the same time, if the Holy Spirit is active preveniently on an individual basis, then the Holy Spirit must also be active collectively. The 'collective conscience' of a culture may reflect in some way how the Holy Spirit has been at work. This explains why none of the kingdoms of the world is wholly corrupt and evil. Wesley stated that 'some great truths, as the being and attributes of God, and the difference between moral good and evil, were known in some measure to the heathen world; the traces of them are to be found in all nations'.²⁸ God by his grace has spared humanity both total darkness and total wickedness. So even in China and India, God has not been absent, even during long centuries when the name of Christ was nowhere proclaimed. Some knowledge of God has

²⁶ John Wesley to John Mason, November 21, 1776, in *Letters*, 6: 239–40.

²⁷ See Lycurgus W. Starkey, Jr., *The Work of the Holy Spirit: A study in Wesleyan Theology* (New York: Abingdon, 1962), 41–45; Wesley, 'On Working Out Our Own Salvation', *Works*, vol. 3, ed. Albert C. Outler (Nashville: Abingdon, 1986), 203–207. Since prevenient grace is given to all as the result of Christ's deed on the cross, the resurrection, and the gift to humankind of the Holy Spirit, rationale is there for the baptism of either infants or adult converts. In no case is baptism in itself salvific for Wesley. Rather, it is an outward symbol corresponding to the depths of spiritual reality, an inward work of grace. If grace is universally operative in drawing individuals to the saving knowledge of Jesus Christ, then infant baptism is the church's proclamation of that work. Prevenient grace is salvific only until the person is able to make conscious decision to accept or reject the offer of eternal life through Christ. Becoming personally accountable is knowing the way of God but wilfully sinning nonetheless. If the individual accepts Christ, and neither infant baptism nor prevenient grace guarantees this, then individuals become assured of their divine childhood. Even if there is rejection, the Holy Spirit continues to woo and lure—for salvation is never coercive, only persuasive. Whether a child is baptized or not, prevenient grace is active and any child who dies before knowingly violating the intent of God will be saved whether born to Hindu or Christian parents. Infant baptism is profoundly filled with theocentric sensitivity to God's presence preveniently at work from the moment of birth. Child dedication, by comparison, is more human-centred, concentrating on the parents and the congregation's responsibility in the nurturing of the child. See Bernard G. Holland, *Baptism in Early Methodism* (London: Epworth, 1970), 11–12, citing R. E. Cushman and R. E. Davies; Ole E. Borgen, *John Wesley on the Sacraments*, 126–128.

²⁸ John Wesley, 'On Working Out Our Own Salvation', *Works*, vol. 3, ed. Albert C. Outler, 199.

shown through; some laws have been just and fair; some morality has prevailed; some order rather than chaos has been maintained.²⁹

Yet due to sin goodwill does not come to humankind naturally. The theology of prevenient grace acknowledges the depth of human sin while attributing all the slightest motions toward God in the human soul to divine grace. With grace, with the Holy Spirit enabling their wills, individuals are capable of doing good. Prevenient grace provides the capacity for choice in ethical decisions. The race is wholly depraved and by nature deprived of God; but God graciously reveals himself, and gives of himself to all.³⁰

The deeper, more perplexing question reemerges, as to whether p. 22 individuals may have faith in this unknown, yet to be revealed Christ, and be saved. Can they have faith in the God beyond their own, and their culture's gods? And can such faith save? I can conceive of a few persons being able to transcend their own cultural and religious boundaries to such faith. There could be some who would not succumb to, and who would repent of the universal tendency toward idolatry, to worship what their own hands had created, and rather worship the Creator beyond. If so, it would be because grace has penetrated somehow through the forms of nature, culture or religion and because there has been personal response to such grace, all of which flows from Christ. All have sinned, fallen short of the glory of God and have volitionally violated what they knew to be right, and if there is any revelation *or* salvation it is only because of the cross. Faith directed toward what is known is far better, far stronger, than directed toward what is unseen; but there can be such faith, I suppose, along with an inner sense of remorse for personal sins. Faith is much more apt to persevere to the end within a community of belief; but at least it is conceivable that such faith strengthened by grace could persist to the end. Ultimately, of course, it is God who knows. Meanwhile Christians are commissioned to speak of Christ to all.³¹

Cross-cultural ministers must not evangelize by opposing cultures, if the Holy Spirit already has been at work in them, but must find continuities between the revealed gospel and the structures of society. By listening to culture, by attentively understanding its form, and depths of meaning, they may discover just how the Holy Spirit has been working. More than two hundred years ago Nikolaus Zinzendorf expressed these sentiments:³²

If we tell a savage of his Saviour, the Holy Spirit has surely been there ten years before; and if we get so far as to speak one intelligible word to men, we are witnesses of the Holy Spirit. We assure them of that which they had long ago, only they could not read it or

²⁹ See Ajith Fernando, *The Christian's Attitude Toward World Religions* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale, 1987), 120–123.

³⁰ John Wesley, 'The Circumcision of the Heart', *Works*, vol. 1, ed. Albert C. Outler, 403; George C. Cell, *The Rediscovery of John Wesley* (Reprint, Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1983), 281–282; Robert E. Chiles, *Theological Transition in American Methodism, 1790–1935* (Reprint, Lanham MD: University Press of America, 1983), 150–151; Leon O. Hynson, *To Reform the Nation: Theological Foundations of Wesley's Ethics* (Grand Rapids: Francis Asbury Press, Zondervan, 1984), 70.

³¹ Richard S. Taylor seems to agree; see 'A Theology of Missions', in *Ministering to the Millions*, comp. Department of World Missions (Kansas City: Nazarene Publishing House, 1971), 30–31. Related is the debate as to whether Cornelius was saved before receiving the Holy Spirit. See [Acts 10:35](#); Taylor, *Exploring Christian Holiness*, vol. 3: *The Theological Formulation* (Kansas City: Beacon Hill Press, 1985), 79–80, 118–124; J. Kenneth Grider, *Entire Sanctification: The Distinctive Doctrine of Wesleyanism* (Kansas City: Beacon Hill Press, 1980), 48–52.

³² Quoted in S. Baudert, 'Zinzendorf's Thought on Mission Related To His Views of the World', *The International Review of Missions* 21 (July 1932), 396.

express it; we emphasize it, we put the seal upon it. We simply assist the Holy Spirit in his work. [p. 23](#)

Where the religious thought of a people conforms to the revelation of God in the Bible there is no apt explanation except that the Light has been shining. Yet even where his name has been made known—in India likely from the first century, in China from the seventh, in Japan at least from the sixteenth—there has been rejection of the Light.

There is no doubt that the world is in darkness. The overwhelmingly unfair distribution of this world's goods evidences this. Men and women are greedy and lustful for both wealth and power, as if these could somehow assure personal peace of harmony. In spiritual pride human beings attempt to find their own salvation, and always fail. Groping in a dark cave of life toward the slightest flickering of light, individuals may be sure that grace is trying to lead them out into the sun.

The bright star over the manger announced him, but the radiance of his life through centuries and around the world far surpasses that star. Christian witnesses may be guides toward God's grace, pointing to the Lamb of God who said even of himself that he was the Light of the world ([John 8:12](#)). And the Light is proclaimed by the Life.

III. THE MESSAGE AND THE MESSENGER

Tragic it is sometimes that the Message is confused with the messenger or that the messenger is lifted up higher than the Message, as John the writer of the Gospel well knew. He likely pastored in Ephesus, a place where there was a strong cult of John the Baptist which competed with Christians.³³ John the Baptist had his adulators. So it was necessary to reemphasize that John the Baptist himself had said that he was unworthy even to untie the sandals of the one about whom he spoke; that he had said that he must decrease while Christ increases; that he called for repentance, whereas the Lamb of God would take away the sin of the world; and though he could baptize with water, the Son of God would baptize with the Holy Spirit.

Wesleyanism has always tried to combine holiness of heart with that of life—pure intentions with righteous actions. True holiness is not a mere attention to the spiritual. It is a holistic concern which involves every dimension of the ministering Christian in order to serve the [p. 24](#) gospel. This calls for self-emptiness so that there might be Christ actualization in and through one's life.

John the Baptist's humility is an example. Minister and missionaries must have the same spirit of honesty and humility, letting those among whom they minister know that they are unworthy servants of the one about whom they witness. Unfortunately this is not always the case and it is too easy to allow hearers to think of them too highly.³⁴

There is already a proneness toward inferiority among many in the Two-Thirds World when it comes to Westerners. Missionaries arrive out of the sky in jets, drive up to shacks and bamboo churches in airconditioned cars and live lives which seem to most of the people among whom they work luxurious, lavish, and wasteful. How can they tell people of the cross? How can they tell national pastors that they must sacrifice even their very

³³ See [Acts 19:1-7](#); compared to the long tradition of the writing of the gospel by John at Ephesus. However, there is debate among scholars on these points. Cf. Barnabas Lindars, *The Gospel of John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972), 59-61; John A. T. Robinson, *The Priority of John*, ed. J. F. Oakley (London: SCM, 1985), 45-47, 170-172.

³⁴ Quoted in S. Baudert, 'Zinzendorf's Thought on Mission Related To His Views of the World', *The International Review of Missions* 21 (July 1932), 396.

lives for the sake of Christ? What has the missionary sacrificed? The Christianity of missions is one of wealth in comparison to people in the Two-Thirds World, which finds out now only too quickly that the missionaries have feet of clay. Any missions strategy which allows the messenger of the gospel to live like this must be unbiblical. Ministers are to be the servants of those among whom they labour and must not 'lord it over them' like Roman soldiers ([Mark 10:42-43](#)). It has never been God's way and in this age of rising world consciousness and education in the Two-Thirds World it is no way at all.

From passion to compassion

Even before language expertise or evangelistic strategies, missionaries must possess the mind of Christ. That is, they must exhibit a 'crucified mind, emptied of self'.³⁵ Missionaries, says Ajith Fernando from Sri Lanka, must possess humility in the possession of their culture. There must also be teachability, patience and a cooperative mentality.³⁶ Great and good as communication skills are, these do not make missionaries what they ought to be. Within every missionary there must be what Albert C. Outler describes as taking place in Wesley's life, a 'conversion from passion to compassion as his dominant emotion, ... from a harsh zealot of God's judgement to a winsome p. 25 witness to God's grace, from a censorious critic to an effective pastor, from arrogance to humility'.³⁷ In short, before they can 'tell it well', they must live it well. Even if missionaries can speak others' languages fluently, 'with the tongues of men and women and of angels,' if they lack love they are but noisy gongs and clanging symbols. Love demands that there be a plain and simple Christian lifestyle accompanying the message of the gospel of Jesus Christ ([1 John 3:16-18](#)). Ken R. Gnanakan from India laments the 'preoccupation with the preaching of the gospel without an equally strong emphasis on the demonstration of this life-changing gospel'.³⁸ Can any missions strategy allow missionaries to live way beyond the means of the people to whom they are trying to witness? This is not the way of Christ.³⁹

He came to minister among the poor, and in order to do so he came without his heavenly possessions and took up the cross. He left his splendour to walk dusty roads with the 'harassed and helpless', upon whom he was filled with compassion ([Matt. 9:36](#)). He did not come as an archangel, halfway condescending to men and women. He came as a man, to horizontally identify with humanity. So must missionaries bond themselves with those to whom they minister.⁴⁰ The Word became flesh and dwelt for a while among men and women. He forms the model and the pattern of ministry. The servant model of ministry which is being harkened to by pastoral theologians today must also be the model of the missionary. There must be an incarnational theology of mission wherein missionaries lose themselves for the sake of others as they take up the cross of Christ, who

³⁵ Kosuke Koyama, *Waterbuffalo Theology* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1974), 24.

³⁶ Ajith Fernando, 'Missionaries Still Needed—of a Special Kind', *Evangelical Missions Quarterly* 24 (January 1988) 19.

³⁷ *Evangelism in the Wesleyan Spirit*, 19.

³⁸ *Kingdom Concerns: A Biblical Exploration Towards a Theology of Mission* (Bangalore: Theological Book Trust, 1989), 161.

³⁹ The issue of missionary lifestyle is presented in Waldron Scott, *Bring Forth Justice: A Contemporary Perspective on Mission* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980), 31-32, 160; Ronald J. Sider *Rich Christians in an Age of Hunger: A Biblical study*, rev. ed. (Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity Press, 1984), 197-198, but it is largely neglected in missiological literature.

⁴⁰ See also Jerald Johnson, *The International Experience* (Kansas City: Nazarene Publishing House, 1982), 19.

showed the way to the Father. Does anyone want to see the Father? Want to go to the place he is preparing? ([John 14:4-9](#)). It is not across the Jordan, not into the desert. The way he has shown is the way of the cross. In supreme paradox, all of the darkness of the world—death, sin and hell—is defeated by the cross, in the midst of darkness it lights the way. No one goes home except by way of the cross, there is no other way for any to go. The old missionary ideal of past generations, of going to a lost [p. 26](#) world no matter the cost materially and of being willing to suffer, is *not* out-dated. It is the way of Christ.⁴¹ In a letter to a prospective missionary the Indian poet Rabindranath Tagore wrote:⁴²

Do not always be trying to preach your doctrine, but give yourself in love. Your Western mind is too much obsessed with the idea of conquest and possession ... The object of Christian should be to be like Christ ... the real preaching is in being perfect, which is through meekness and love and self-dedication. If you are strong in your pride of race, pride of sect, and pride of personal superiority, then it is no use to try to do good to others ... On the spiritual plane you cannot *do* good until you *are* good. You cannot preach the Christianity of the Christian sect until you are like Christ.

Thus this Indian, by prevenient grace, issued a very Wesleyan call for sanctified missionaries! He continued: 'But one thing I ask of you: Will you be able to make yourself one of those whom you call "natives", not merely in habits but in love?' Perhaps too many Western missionaries are pampered and preened. The nationals hardly know how to deal with them anymore, daring not to invite them to places not antiseptically clean. Certain things Westerners think of as necessities for the over-whelming masses of world are luxuries. No wonder, then, God in these latter days seems to be choosing to work less through Westerners to evangelize the world, and rather to be turning toward those from the Two-Thirds World. From their own experience non-Western Christians have seen how missionaries should and should not act; they are more willing to do without and to live on less; they often are more on fire for the gospel; and perhaps they are living more nearly like Christ.⁴³ Only if Western missionaries are willing not only to tell it well but to live it well should they go at all.

John the Baptist both lived a lifestyle which he knew would facilitate his message, and made himself expendable, happy when his disciples left him to follow Christ. That was his purpose, to point to the Saviour. And when the Saviour came, his task was complete, just as was his joy. So also must missionaries be happy when they find 'their' followers already well down the path after Jesus. Their job, as John the Baptist's, is temporary, so that Jesus only is glorified. They are to lift up him, not themselves. They are not the Word, the Light or the Message. There [p. 27](#) are in this world false messengers and messages and people putting their hopes in such will eventually lose as that which is not ultimate inevitably passes away. Christians are to glorify the Message so that he in his time will glorify them. If there is any present self-gratification, they already have their reward.

CONCLUSION

⁴¹ Regarding an incarnational theology of mission, see Paul R. Orjala, *God's Mission is My Mission* (Kansas City: Nazarene Publishing House, 1985), 45–62.

⁴² In C. F. Andrews, *Mahatma Gandhi's Ideas: Including Selections from His Writings* (New York: MacMillan Company, 1930), 354–355.

⁴³ R. Franklin Cook, *The International Dimension: Six Expressions of the Great Commission* (Kansas City: Nazarene Publishing House, 1984), 19–20.

There is unity among Christians through the Word, the Light and the Message. Just as the sun unites all human kind physically, as all are dependent on it, so the Son unites all Christians spiritually. The light goes out from the empty tomb almost two thousand years ago and extends now around the world., The leadership for the extension of the gospel rests not with a few but with all of those who have placed their faith in him. All are dependent upon him, and through him a new community is created. No longer are there Americans or Filipinos, white or brown; now all are Christians first of all. The highest loyalty and allegiance goes to Christ and in him the boundaries of state or race are forgotten. Yet I need brown brothers and sisters so that I might be authentically Christian. I need their perspective on the form of Christianity which I take up so that I may be sure that it is pure and not simply some cultural aberration. And they need me too so that they may avoid the same. Christian theology so built will be purer at the core than any particular cultural expression of it because it will be done through many eyes and hearts.

The community of the Word, of the Light and of the Message is the community of love, a love which shows respect for the dignity and integrity of others. There is no room for a dominating and superior spirit. Christians must relate with one another as brothers and sisters walking beside each other on the way the Word has revealed, the Light has shown and the Message has demonstrated, the way of Christ.

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Dialogue with Non-Christians in the New Testament

I. Howard Marshall

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In this article Professor Marshall argues that dialogue as understood today is not found in the New Testament. He examines the use of the word in the Acts and concludes that the goal is to correct misunderstandings of the gospel and not to reformulate it. He looks at dialogue in the synoptics, in Paul's letters and in the Gospel of John in relation to the presentation of the gospel. He questions whether the church and the world ever conversed as equal partners in search of truth. On the other hand, the author discusses the role of dialogue in understanding and communicating the gospel in response to people's felt needs. Not all will agree with the author's definition of contemporary dialogue and may wish to ask how far cultural factors of religion, economics and politics have influenced our understanding of the gospel and whether or not dialogue between Christian scholars and with people of other faiths enables us to see more clearly the biblical message. The issue is more than one of communication, it goes to the heart of our hermeneutical methodology.

Editor