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EDITOR: BRUCE J. NICHOLLS



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Ethical Issues in Evangelism and Justice Among the Poor

Alan Nichols

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In this article the author reflecting on the biblical text and his own involvement with Asian refugees, draws attention to a number of ethical issues in evangelism and justice among the poor—issues that some evangelical evangelists and development workers either ignore or evidence little sensitivity to. His interpretation of the much discussed passages in [Acts 17](#) and [Matthew 25](#) in the context of witness to Buddhist refugees raises important questions on the relationship between world views and cultural behaviour and in pressing for a religious response from the powerless. He suggests areas where Christian credibility is at stake.

Editor

The thesis of this paper is that it is unethical for Christians to pressure for conversion in situations where the poor are completely dependent on foreign support, such as refugee camps or communities heavily sustained by development projects; and that Christian witness by aid and development workers is undermined where foreigners breach the hospitality of a host country by challenging its cultural norms, or by using conversion as the image of belief in Christ when preaching to people in a non-Christian religious context such as Buddhism. Proclamation of the gospel is best done by local churches who are in partnership with development or relief agencies.

A MODEL FOR ENGAGING WITH LOCAL CULTURE

[Acts 17:16–34](#) gives us a clear example of the apostle Paul's strategy to build on the culture of his hearers (by quoting their poets) and on the religion visible locally (the altar 'to an unknown god'). Is this [P. 138](#) story included in The Acts merely as part of a narrative about Paul's flexibility in preaching the gospel as a primary evangelism, or is it there as a model for the Church facing similar cultural situations?

I want to argue that this narrative is there for our learning, and I have the support of F. F. Bruce and others for this view.¹ The Athens address is a significant model for interacting in a positive way with existing local, history and religious awareness, and working towards a sharing of the gospel of Jesus and his resurrection.

Paul did not always reach the goal of actually discussing the resurrection (some thought anastasis was another god²), but that does not invalidate the model. This way of approaching the audience was presumably used by Paul throughout his 18 months in Athens, and in Corinth subsequently. As a consistent style of apologetics, it must have produced conversions, for Paul is able to say later³ that the gospel is bearing fruit and growing 'all over the world', and this cannot just be with Jewish conversions.

¹ p. 354, F. F. Bruce, *The Acts of the Apostles*, Eerdmans, US.

² [Acts 17:32](#).

³ [Colossians 1:6](#).

In [Acts 17](#), Paul is selective in quoting well-known local poets, and his religious quote is an odd graveyard inscription which suits his purpose. Both are inoffensive, and both suit his purpose as building-blocks for presenting a gospel which engages with the culture without undermining it. Of course, in the longer view, we know that Christianity can act in a counter-cultural way, and that civil disobedience is envisaged in [Revelation 13](#) and other places as a gospel duty in certain circumstances. But, in the preaching of the gospel this model says you can engage positively with elements of culture and worldview which do not conflict with Christ.

THE CONCEPT OF CONVERSION

Conversion is a highly controversial concept in the modern world. Some Christians hold back from any evangelism and fall in the trap of syncretism, implicitly affirming that all religions lead to God.

In the case of Hinduism, relatively few have been converted to Christianity. In the view of David Burnett, this is because the worldviews of Christianity and Hinduism are too different, and because Hinduism has a capacity to absorb religious insights from other faiths.⁴

In the case of Islam, the understanding of revelation is quite different from Christianity's. 'In Islam, the inspiration came directly to Muhammad and was transmitted orally and eventually written down in the Qu'ran word for word, in a manner similar to dictation ... Christianity, on the other hand, has considered that the Bible as the revelation of God has been expressed through human writers.'⁵ This, plus the central place of Muhammad himself, marks out Islam as a religion obviously resistant to conversion. Muslims are in fact possibly more evangelistically minded [p. 139](#) than most Christians. As a result, the impact of renewed Christian mission on Islam has been small, partly—in the view of Burnett⁶—through cultural insensitivity on the part of Christian missionaries, and partly through association with European colonial powers.⁷ By contrast with Islam, Christianity has shown itself to be eminently transferable by having the Christian Scriptures immediately translated into local languages.

However, it would be misleading to attribute Islam's rejection of Christianity largely to clumsiness by missionaries and the colonial legacy. The first and foremost reason that Christianity has got nowhere in converting Muslims derives from the fact that because Islam post-dates Christianity, there are a number of anti-Christian statements in its scripture. For example, Chapter 114 of the Qu'ran, which plays a similar function within Islam to the Lord's Prayer and is as widely known, includes a negative reference to both Christianity and Judaism at verse 7. Elsewhere throughout the Qu'ran, there is an abundance of references which are directly and overtly critical of Christianity. Thus in order for Christianity to appeal to Muslims, it needs first to cast doubt on the credibility of these references in the Qu'ran, which is of course unacceptable to Muslims.

⁴ p. 79, David Burnett, *Clash of Worlds*, MARC, Eastbourne, 1990.

⁵ p. 109, Burnett.

⁶ p. 115, Burnett.

⁷ William R. Shenk supports this, in 'Moving beyond word and deed', in *Missiology: an International Review*, Vol. XX, No. 1, Jan. 1993.

So, in the three major world religions, it can be said that the idea of conversion can be said to be offensive to people already satisfied with their own cultural religion. The idea of salvation is not necessarily offensive.

BIBLICAL METAPHORS FOR SALVATION

It is interesting how varied are Paul's metaphors for salvation. In [Acts 17](#) in Athens he uses 'repent' as the foundational idea. In Romans, it is 'justified by faith'. In 1 Corinthians it is 'calling on the name of the Lord.' In 2 Corinthians it is God 'setting his seal of ownership.' In Galatians we are 'rescued from this present evil age'. In Ephesians and commonly in Paul's writings, people simply 'believe'.

It may well be that Paul chose the image of justification by faith because of his preoccupation with Jewish hearers who were fixed on the Law of Moses as an immutable point of God's revelation, and because he needed a legal concept to transform their understanding. Jurgen Moltmann⁸ goes further: he claims that the Christ event is much greater than the doctrine of justification by faith as it has come down to us, and so it reaches 'beyond the present of word and faith, opening to man the future of salvation and the lordship of Jesus Christ by securing for him, in his transitory existence, the hope of a new life, thereby setting him in eschatological liberty'. Moltmann will not be shut up into legal definitions. Nor should we. So justification by faith is appropriate for some audiences; other concepts work better in others.⁹ p. 140

Elsewhere in the New Testament, other images for salvation are new birth,¹⁰ members of God's house-hold¹¹ and branches grafted onto the main tree.¹² These illustrate the diversity of terms used to express the moment of putting personal faith in Christ as Lord and Saviour, what the preachers of yesterday used to call 'closing with Christ'. This diversity demonstrates that today's preacher or missionary has plenty of flexibility in choosing terms and promoting ideas which do not offend, or—to put it positively engage with local known understanding.

Conversion as an image is used in [1 Thessalonians 1:9–10](#) ('turning from idols to the living God') but seldom elsewhere. In today's international environment the word conversion is usually negative, implying proselytism. True conversion is a deep inner spiritual change; proselytism is change of religion under pressure, or to gain an advantage. But the ideas are often confused. In my view belief in Christ or following Christ are much better biblical images to use. This does not mean that the concept of conversion is invalid; just that it may be inappropriate.

There is an exegetical point here. F. F. Bruce points out¹³ that Paul's reference to the Athenians being religious was not necessarily complimentary: 'Paul is stating a fact, not paying a compliment; we are told that it was forbidden to use complimentary exordia when addressing the Areopagus, in hope of securing its goodwill.' F. F. Bruce also points out that Paul demolishes the false idea which the Athenians held that God was somehow

⁸ P. 149ff, Jurgen Moltmann, *The Future of Creation*, SCM Press London, 1979.

⁹ P. 152, Moltmann.

¹⁰ [John 3:3](#).

¹¹ [Colossians 2:19](#).

¹² [Romans 11:17](#).

¹³ P. 355, Bruce.

dependent on his creatures for their worship and service. So it is not as though Paul necessarily agreed with everything in the culture, even the selective bits he quotes; but he does engage with it, comment on it, take his audience from their known position towards the truth which Paul himself has apprehended. John Stott elaborates this in his commentary.¹⁴

This playing with terms is on the surface of a much deeper question: that behind any options for the term conversion lies a fundamental theology of salvation. Belief becomes possible only because there is an incarnate God to believe in. God is portrayed through the Bible as saving and redeeming in nature. God is revealed in creation (all human beings are in God's image), in the covenant with Abraham (through him all nations will be blessed), in the liberating of a group of slaves from Egypt (leading them through the Exodus experience to the promised land), in the proclamation and action of the prophets (showing God's justice and love), and supremely in Jesus Christ, Word made flesh, and the gift of the Holy Spirit, who made of fearful disciples the seed of the Christian Church. Beatriz Melano Couch¹⁵ writes: 'There is a steady, p. 141 consistent line of action in God's dealings with a particular people, Israel, and then the new Israel, towards the salvation of the universal family.' Couch then argues that God's promise in [Isaiah 61](#), affirmed by Jesus in [Luke 4:18-19](#), shows the God of Justice and the God of Love. Justice without love may mean human fairness but without opening spaces for reconciliation and redemption. There is a whole argument here about the holism of justice and love displayed together in the Trinitarian nature of God.

Christ came not merely to 'change souls' but to save and transform the whole of humanity. Political structures—indeed, everything—comes under the judgement of Christ. And within the range of his redemption.

IS THE CROSS BY DEFINITION OFFENSIVE?

Within the biblical revelation, the Cross of Christ is described¹⁶ as a 'stumbling block to the Jews and foolishness to Gentiles'. In Greek, stumbling block is *skandalon* (origin of the English word scandal), and it meant a rock to fall over, or a means of trapping someone, but this does not imply offence in the sense of deeply wounding or being personally offensive. It would have to be said, in terms of missionary history, that any offence given by the gospel has usually been due to missionaries' insensitivity and naivety, rather than to any offence inherent in the gospel itself. Having said that, we do not need to whitewash the host communities, who sometimes deliberately misread the message. An example is found within Islam. Try as Christians may, we cannot get across the notion of Trinity to Muslims, who are convinced it refers to God the Father, God the Mother, and God the Son. This offends them for two reasons: firstly it implies that God committed the unspeakable—indulged in sex—and secondly it proves in their mind that Christianity is polytheistic.

Sometimes offence is given because Christians will not engage in the local culture, believing that the Cross implies rejecting 'the world'. But, as Lesslie Newbigin writes,¹⁷ 'In

¹⁴ P. 280–291, John Stott, *The Message of Acts*, IVP London 1990.

¹⁵ Beatriz Melano Couch, 'Theological Perspective from the Point of View of the Oppressed,' in *Journal Towards a Liberating Spirituality: Voices from the Third World*, Vol. XIII, June 1990.

¹⁶ [1 Corinthians 1:20–25](#).

¹⁷ p. 194, Lesslie Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, Eerdmans, US, WCC Geneva 1989.

the resurrection of Jesus, the original covenant with creation and with all human life, the covenant with Noah and his descendants, is reaffirmed. The world of human culture rejects God and is under God's judgements. But God in his patient and long-suffering love sustains the created world, and the world of human culture in being, in order that there may still be time and space for repentance and for the coming into being of the new creation within the womb of the old.'

But Paul avoids offence in the language he chooses. He uses the image of 'being ambassadors for Christ',¹⁸ and this suggests diplomacy, commending a position without offending the locals, arguing a case rather than compelling by force. It comes down in the end to consistent ethical behaviour by p. 142 Christians: we are to 'make every effort to do what leads to peace'.¹⁹ We are to be peacemakers. In commending the gospel, as in all we do, we do it peacefully, inoffensively, keeping in good relations with other people and with a 'good reputation among outsiders'.²⁰

In using the language of diplomacy, do we have to compromise the uniqueness of Christ, by appearing to be too positive about other religions? Not at all. But it is more than a question of language; it is also a question of belief. Newbigin argues²¹ that if we believe in God as Saviour of the world, we should be looking for signs of his salvation everywhere—in the lives of people who do not yet know Jesus as Lord; and in the acts of politics and development which transform communities. 'The Christian,' he writes, 'will be eager to cooperate with people of all faiths and ideologies in all projects which are in line with the Christian's understanding of God's purpose in history.'

There will be struggles for justice and freedom in which we can and should hold hands with those of other faiths and ideologies to achieve specific goals, even though our ultimate goal is Christ and his coming in glory and not what our collaborators imagine. It is in the process of this spiritual journey that the context for true dialogue is provided, as we work together with people with other commitments but with a common task of salvation and redemption of people and communities. This is not to assume that there is a universally held view of the nature of justice. There is the John Rawls view of justice as fairness, assuming individuals will make disinterested judgements about the common good. And there are many other views of justice which hold the community as supreme. Nevertheless, when a common view of justice is held, then Christians can work together with others in achieving common goals for society, which for the Christian will be the kind of transformation into the Kingdom of God which the Scriptures envisage.

A Case Study in Working with Buddhists

The heart of Buddhism, according to Buddhadasa Bhikku, one of the famous interpreters to westerners, is: 'a religion based on intelligence, science, knowledge, whose purpose is the destruction of suffering and the source of suffering.'²² Buddhism is not prayers, or Buddha images, or merit-making. These are abuses, what Bhikku calls 'tumours' which obscure the good material. It is wrong, he says, for foreigners to come and point to these

¹⁸ [2 Corinthians 5:20](#).

¹⁹ [Romans 14:19](#)

²⁰ [1 Timothy 3:7](#).

²¹ p. 180ff, Newbigin. See also *The Unique Christ in our Pluralist World*, WEF Manila Declaration, 1993, World Evangelical Fellowship Theological Commission, Seoul.

²² p. 2ff, Buddhadasa Bhikku, *Handbook for Mankind*, publ. Buddhasadasa Foundation, Thailand, 1988.

shameful and disgraceful growths as being Buddhism rather than novelties and accretions.

In my two years in Thailand, working alongside Buddhists to meet the humanitarian and spiritual needs of 70,000 refugees from [p. 143](#) Burma, I came to admire those trying to follow pure Buddhism, practising the noble paths of virtue and working to relieve suffering. Their motives were as good as mine; their dedication no less.

What is more, when you sit alongside the refugees and to some extent share their suffering, you meet Christ face to face. That is what Jesus said in [Matthew 25:31–46](#) and I testify that it is true. But in my case the refugees were mostly Buddhists. Did this mar the image of Christ in their face? No, in their suffering, they shared more than I ever have. I gave a coat once to a refugee, feeling good that I was actually obeying the scriptural injunction rather than building my fashion wardrobe, and then to my astonishment, the young student to whom I gave the coat was not wearing it two weeks later—he had given it to someone who needed it more. This coat has been up and down the Thai-Burma border ever since!

In a long term civil war, with vicious elements such as forced labour for portering food and arms, women used frequently as rape victims, and ethnic villages destroyed, I saw their suffering as like the suffering of Christ. Is this not how we are meant to see it?

In the above exegesis of [Matthew 25](#), I acknowledge selecting a particular view. Alfred Plummer's classic commentary²³ says that Christ's claiming of the poor and needy as his brethren was quite in keeping with his character as Son of man and Son of God. But some evangelical commentators have interpreted this passage as though it applies only to the 'brethren'—that is, Christians. This presupposes a later editing of Matthew reflecting the persecution of Christians a generation later. I do not subscribe to this later dating.

If I am right in my understanding of [Matthew 25](#), I can then identify not only with the extent of their trauma, I can also sympathize with their religion which has a slogan 'smoke by night, fire by day,' which describes a spiritual restlessness reflecting a person who has not achieved tranquillity and has been deprived of spiritual nourishment. Is this not similar to Jesus' command not to 'quench the smoking flax'?²⁴

Buddhism like Christianity has many varieties. The kind I came into contact with most, because they were active in helping refugees and rescuing women caught in prostitution, is called 'The Network of Engaged Buddhists', which promotes social justice and equality for every person. Their views are very like those of Christians who understand that the gospel is holistic, concerned about social inequities.

The particular group of young Burmese students with whom I was associated in Bangkok, all refugees from an oppressive military regime back home which did not allow dissent of any kind, had embraced a form of Buddhism based on nonviolent principles, emerging from Aung San Suu Kyi's teaching, which was in turn based on the religion and [p. 144](#) philosophy of Mahatma Gandhi.²⁵ Their commitment to non-violence had a cost: they engaged in unarmed struggle against a regime with 400,000 soldiers, so you had to have a strong view of truth winning. Each of this group in fact had been arrested back home, tortured for information, and had been on the run in exile for five years.

This is not to suggest that Buddhism has truths equal to Christianity. What is interesting is that there is little scope for forgiveness in the Buddhist tradition. The

²³ p. 351, Alfred Plummer, *An Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew*, James Clarke, London.

²⁴ [Isaiah 42:3](#), quoted in [Matthew 12:20](#).

²⁵ Aung San Suu Kyi, *Freedom from Fear*, Penguin, UK 1992.

Christian focus for forgiveness and reconciliation, the Cross, is missing.²⁶ Here is something positive and extra Christians can offer to the Buddhist tradition, without necessarily trampling on their principles or their path of virtue. Much of the practice of virtue is consistent with Christianity; but there are some missing pieces—to Christians, vital pieces—of the spiritual puzzle which we can supply.

Nor does this imply that Christians are more consistent in applying their own principles of, for example, peacemaking and reconciliation. We can point to the incapacity for forgiveness among Burmese in their long-running civil war, and we might blame their internecine strife on the Buddhist lack of forgiveness. But they could equally point to the grudges held for generations among the various brands of nominal and cultural Christians in Ireland or Yugoslavia, resulting in the current civil war and strife in those places. We can show you 'a more perfect way', but can we live it out ourselves?

ETHICAL QUESTIONS IN JUSTICE AND EVANGELISM MINISTRIES

If my thesis holds that the New Testament leads us away from offending people's culture or religion as we proclaim the gospel, can we identify more closely the situations when this offence might occur? And can we separate the concept of conversion from the pressure by which we seek to press conversion upon others? Both the concept and the pressure have the possibility of giving offence in different environments.

First what does it mean to 'give offence'? We can distinguish between provoking a consciousness of shame, regarding the lifestyle and values of the community and their identity within it, and provoking a consciousness of guilt, which suggests failing God's standards. These days being hurt or feeling shame is often expressed by anger. To provoke either response by our proclamation or by attitude is obviously to invite a negative response to our message. Let me test four ethical issues.

1. We Offend if We Manipulate People's Dependence on Our Support to Get a Religious Response

It is always unethical to manipulate other people or pressurize them to **p. 145** act against their will or their own interests. It is also contrary to the spirit of the gospel. There are two common environments where this may occur these days: refugee camps, and community development projects which are resourced from outside the community. My experience with refugees is that they are so conscious of their powerlessness that they are likely to accept any conditions attached to aid to keep alive, or to feed their children. Their situation is so desperate that they will even flee from Burma to Bangladesh, the least developed country in the world, to seek help.²⁷

This pressure can be on individuals, or on partners in the development project. C. B. Samuel²⁸ writes: 'In terms of partnership in mission there are some key issues that we need to look at if we take Christian spirituality seriously. What are the important components in the relationship between partners? Since spirituality is central in transformation, how do we translate spiritual standards into practical requirement in the partnership? Pharisee's or Jesus' options? What is the place of money in this relationship?

²⁶ Salvation in Buddhism is through awakening rather than through any act of atonement. See p. 56–60, *Love Meets Wisdom: a Christian Experience of Buddhism*, Aloysius Pieris SJ, Orbis Books, New York 1990.

²⁷ At the time of writing, 230,000 Muslims (who call themselves Rohingyas) are in refugee camps near Cox's Bazar in Bangladesh, exiles from ethnic genocide by government troops in Burma/Myanmar.

²⁸ C. B. Samuel, *Spirituality in Transformation*, Paper in World Vision Australia Library.

Would it be right to say that the importance of the spiritual is often inversely proportional to the importance of money in our partnership?' The answers are self-evident on the field. If the whole basis of the relationship is one-way financial dependence, then you will never know what their spiritual life would be like without that dependence. It is certainly not an equal partnership.

To avoid the danger, one needs to adopt some quite different practices, such as those of the Burmese Border Consortium²⁹ in Thailand, where they provide rice and other food, and medicines, to the gate of the Karen and Mort refugee camps, but the elected officials of the refugees themselves take over from there, administering everything according to need—food supplement to pregnant women, etc. There is a dignity to the self-administration, even if they cannot be self-supporting. The partnership then is: we have the money to buy the food, but the equal and fair distribution without corruption is entirely up to you.

The danger of religious manipulation is evident from the reputation of certain North American fundamentalist groups who, once peace was declared in Cambodia and the refugees went home, flooded into Phnom Penh to 'preach the gospel', having done nothing for the Cambodians during the whole time of their crisis over 18 years. Prince Sihanouk, seeing the danger with great clarity, immediately registered the Catholic and Anglican churches so he could reject applications from the rest for official registration. Such is the awareness in the 'Third World' of the risk of being manipulated by [p. 146](#) religious interests who care nothing for the history and culture of the people. This danger is elaborated in Nichols, 'Refugees Religion and Politics', and Cameron, 'Necessary Heresies'.³⁰

2. We Offend When We Pressurize People Towards a Religious Response When They are Powerless in the Face of Much Greater Social and Political Powers

In the week after the October 1993 earthquake in Maharashtra state of India, one Indian Christian agency printed and distributed to survivors of the earthquake, 50,000 tracts urging conversion to Christ. Understandably, the people rejected the message as irrelevant to their condition.

In [Ephesians 6:12](#), Paul writes, 'We are not contending against flesh and blood, but against the principalities, against the powers, against the world rulers of this present darkness, against the spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly place.' The common evangelical view used to be that these were personal spiritual powers, part of the struggle of flesh and spirit. But today many Christian commentators view the 'powers and principalities' as representing structures and institutions which those in power may use for the public good or may manipulate for their personal benefit. This is consistent with [Romans 13](#), where governors are ordained by God for the common good.

What we have to do is work through what this means in Christian ministry and outreach. It is particularly complicated in foreign countries, whether one is a missionary or a development worker, for we come up face to face with truly powerless people, where we feel we can do virtually nothing to change their economic, political or social situation. Westerners are so accustomed to having political power—at least by casting a vote from

²⁹ Report by Jack Dunford, chairman, Burmese Border Consortium May 1993 to Australia-Burma Conference, Sydney, Australia.

³⁰ p. 20, Alan Nichols, *Refugees Religion and Politics*, Acorn Press, Melbourne, 1993, and p. 32ff and p. 170ff, Peter Cameron, *Necessary Heresies: Alternatives to Fundamentalism*, New South Wales University Press, 1993.

time to time—that we are shocked when we have to relate to people who have no control whatever over their circumstances.

If those circumstances are clearly the result of oppression, corruption, fraud or feudalism, what can the foreigner do? For that matter, what can the local do? If, what's more, the majority culture is Buddhist or Hindu or Muslim, so that Christians form a tiny minority, what can the Christian do, whether a local or a foreigner?

This becomes a time for what are sometimes called middle axioms—strategies for living with situations which are less than ideal but which put your principles into practice as well as you possibly can. In a country where corruption and fraud are endemic, your middle axiom might be: 'I will never knowingly engage in corruption or support the system', but another might be, 'For the greater good of the people I serve, I will pay the fee demanded if it is the usual fee.' Or your own conscience may reject abortion, but your middle axiom in a refugee camp might be, 'For the present p. 147 time, another child for this woman would be an utter disaster, so I will facilitate it.'³¹

Someone somewhere must begin to deal with corrupt or oppressive powers. So my most important work as a refugee or development worker, viewed over time, might be advocacy with foreign embassies to create international demand for human rights to be observed, or for corruption to be dealt with as a condition of foreign aid. This is dealing directly with the powers and principalities.

There are some Christians who take an alternative position: that, if Christians sit alongside and share the suffering of poor and marginalized people, that action itself confronts powers and principalities on a spiritual level which is at a more profound level than secular advocacy. The two approaches can be combined, as they are quite deliberately in the work of the Jesuit Refugee Service worldwide. Their motto—and their practice—is to 'share the journey of the refugee', but sometimes this involves interventions with embassies and media to highlight the suffering going on. World Vision staff around the world are facing the same dilemmas. The issue of confronting secular power is explored in some depth by Thomas McAlpine in his book 'Facing the Powers: What are the Options?';³² However we approach this question, Moltmann reminds us that 'the power of sin is also the divine lament of all senseless suffering in the world, the suffering and, injustice that cries out to heaven.'³³

3. It is Unethical and Offensive to Offer to People a Gospel Which Undermines or Despises or Denies the Validity of Their Culture, and When we Preach That to be Christian They Have to be Converted Away From It

The trouble is that Christian conversion often becomes synonymous with cultural conversion. This was the issue which led to the Council of Jerusalem ([Acts 15](#)), the result of which was that Gentiles were not required to become Jews in order to become Christians, but were free to respond to the gospel in accordance with gentile cultural norms. Burnett writes:³⁴ 'A cultural transformation will undoubtedly occur, but it will be one from within their own culture, rather than conversion to a foreign culture.' A paradigm shift is necessary. Christians need to understand the essential nature of the worldview themes revealed in the Bible. This process is helped when we interact with

³¹ For more discussion, see Nichols, *Refugees Religion and Politics*.

³² Thomas McAlpine, *Facing the Powers: what are the options?*, MARC, US 1992.

³³ p. 164, Moltmann.

³⁴ p. 227, Burnett.

Christians from other cultures, so that areas where we are ‘culturally blind’ may come under reexamination.

It may be helpful to distinguish between a worldview which includes social structures of law, education and family, and culture which expresses itself in behaviour, dress and customs. Conversion often starts out at the edge of culture, then moves into social structures.

The biblical worldview of God as Creator can relate to the worldview p.148 of creation expressed within another culture. The aboriginal peoples of Australia, for example, have a Creation myth about the Rainbow Serpent which created the dreamtime landscape where they lived. What Paul would do at an Australian Areopagus today would be to place the two worldviews alongside one another, and let one transform the other. Ultimately then we are talking of a Christian transformation of culture, not a denial or abrogation of it. This idea of transformation is argued classically in Charles Kraft’s ‘Christianity in Culture’.³⁵ He includes the idea that some parts of national culture are not integrated (such as witchdoctors who are unpopular) and are ready for transformation. There are of course aspects of culture such as oppression of women which no Christian can support. You cannot build the gospel on oppression.

We can go further. David Bosch says, ‘The Christian faith never existed except as “translated” into a culture.’³⁶ So in the early days Jews, Greeks, barbarians, Thracians, Egyptians and Romans all felt at home in the Christian Church. Later, the faith was ‘inculturated’ into Syrian, Greek, Roman, Coptic, Armenian, Ethiopian and Maronite liturgies and contexts. In the twentieth century, as both Catholic and Protestant missionaries became conscious that their own versions of Christianity were culturally conditioned, the whole area of mission had to be re-defined. Inculturation has become the way Christian mission is now being explored. And the evidence is that the spread of Christianity has not led to a vast monoculture. Conversion has often meant adding another layer of cultural influences on existing cultural norms. Bosch argues for a ‘double movement’: both inculturation of Christianity and Christianization of culture. All I have argued about ethics is consistent with this current theological exploration.³⁷ And it is all the more powerful when the culture is poor, economically dependent on the West or on foreign aid.

4. The Credibility of Our Witness is Undermined if pastors and Development Workers Engage in Inconsistent or Immoral or Extravagant Behaviour

Whether the Christian is an evangelist, a missionary who plants churches, or a development worker constrained by the limits set by a hostile government, consistency of life is the key indicator of effective Christian witness. Somewhat surprisingly, this is agreed by a sample of Evangelical lay people’s attitudes in the United States to development work overseas.³⁸ It might be expected that they would support only direct proclamation, and that if this were forbidden by the government of a particular country, they would not p. 149 support working in that country. But 92% still supported going

³⁵ William Kraft, Orbis Books, US, 1979, p. 343.

³⁶ p. 447, David Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, Orbis, US 1992.

³⁷ p. 454, Bosch. This is supported by Charles R. Taber in *The World is Too Much with Us*, Mercer University Press, Georgia, 1991, p. 183ff.

³⁸ p. 48, ‘What do Christians expect from Christian Relief and Development?’ in *Stewardship Journal*, Vol. 2, Nos. 3–4, God’s Word Publications, Nashville, 1992.

there. It might also be expected, given the option, that Evangelicals would blame poverty on the individuals. But instead they blamed political and economic structures within the poor countries. 'This,' commented economist Kurt Schaefer, 'was a more finessed and historically literate interpretation of underdevelopment than most academics have been able to muster over the past generation.'³⁹

Another commentator on the survey, Tetsunao Yamamori, said: 'Clearly, both ministry to the soul and to the body are integral to the Church's work. But they are different tasks. Evangelism includes those efforts devoted to the proclamation of the good news of God's salvation in Jesus Christ. These activities bring men and women under the Lordship of Christ and result in a vertical relationship with God. Social action encompasses those efforts devoted to the liberation of men and women in social, political and economic shackles. The results of these are peace, order and harmony on the horizontal plane.'⁴⁰ Some would express this connection in an even more integrated way, by using a different metaphor of the Kingdom. The simplest expression is 'love your neighbour', as in [1 John 3:16](#), 'If anyone has material possessions and sees his brother in need but has no pity on him, how can the love of God be in him?'

The American survey is paralleled by a recent sample of Australians, responding within the National Church Life Survey in 1991 to questions about their attitudes to international aid and development.⁴¹ Church attenders in Australia, half of whom already have a link with work overseas, prefer to support activities such as sponsorship and overseas aid which encompass the meeting of physical and developmental needs through the provision of food, shelter, health care and education. They are not content to support proclamation only. It is also true that overseas activities focusing on environmental, justice or human rights issues were not nearly as well supported as development activity.

So Christians in home countries in the First World expect their representatives in developing countries to be consistently ethical in their behaviour, and expect them to be serving the human and developmental needs of the communities where they are located.

WORKING WITH LOCAL CHURCHES

While it is true that there are still some unevangelized areas of the world, the overwhelming majority of relief and development work occurs in countries where there is a Christian church. It may be a tiny minority in a hostile environment; it may be Catholic, Protestant, independent Evangelical, Coptic, Pentecostal; **P. 150** outsiders may consider the gospel to be cursed by liturgy or tradition. But the Church, whatever state it is in, remains the historical agent for the completion of the eternal purpose of God—his kingdom. As Pedro Arana Quiroz writes: 'The reality of the true Kingdom is the divine perspective it allows us to have with regard to human problems; it gives us another way of speaking about theology. Consequently, the mission of the church consists in giving witness to the kingdom of God in God's world.'⁴² The Church's mission among the poor will include worship by the poor, prophetic action on injustice, service among the poor and saving actions.

³⁹ p. 91, 'What do Christians expect ...?'

⁴⁰ p. 91, 'What do Christians expect ...?'

⁴¹ p. 12, 'Christian Responsibility Towards People in Developing Countries', Occasional Paper No. 4 from 1991 *National Church Life Survey*, publ. Dec. 1992 by Uniting Church Board of Mission, NSW, Sydney.

⁴² 'The Integral Mission to the Poor', Paper presented to the World Evangelical Fellowship Consultation 'Evangelisation of the Poor', Delhi, October 1993.

A difficulty in the evangelical Christian world is that many overseas mission agencies and relief agencies originate from the dreams of individuals and tend to develop independent styles of operation. They attract local Christian talent to staff programmes, and again, tend to act independently of local Christian churches. There is an inconsistency here: our ecclesiology says that the Church is God's agent for mission, but our behaviour often demonstrates a different belief, that God is impatient with the local church and chooses to use other agencies. A consistent behaviour would be for Christian relief and development organizations to act always in cooperation and partnership with local churches. The agency then can express accountability to the local people of God. It can be a mutually beneficial relationship: the agency can become more sensitive to local subculture; the Church can be propelled into mission.

CONCLUSIONS

1. Several things clearly undermine the credibility of Christians witnessing to the gospel among the poor: immoral or insensitive behaviour; paternalism; ignoring the culture and environment of the people.
2. Several things clearly reduce the likelihood of the Christian message being accepted: asking people to jettison their culture. It is not only a matter of being sensitive. It is also engaging positively with the culture and leading people towards the God of creation and redemption.
3. Several things get a response to the gospel which is illegitimately based and will fade with the first wind of hostility or difficulty: 'rice Christians' born out of dependence on foreign interests.
4. The approach in development work which commends the gospel is the presentation by word and life of a holistic mission, where the workers restrain themselves from direct proclamation, commending the gospel by personal ethical behaviour, and avoiding the pitfall of creating dependence.
5. The role of the local church can be important in the direct proclamation but it would also have to be sensitive.
6. If this seems negative, then the [p. 151](#) positive: we don't take Christ out with us; he is already out there in his world, and we meet him in the face of the refugee and the poor whom we are called to serve ([Matthew 25](#)). We also stand ready to explain the faith that is in us, when those watching our lives are sufficiently impressed by our accompaniment with them in their suffering.
7. In ministry to the poor, our Christian witness in this holistic sense is best done by cooperating with local Christian communities of faith. Where the Church is, missionaries are no longer needed (except in technical areas); and the Christian development agency can happily restrict its activity to that part of holistic mission which complements the evangelistic work of the local church. That then eliminates the possibility of 'rice Christians'; more positively, it portrays the gospel in its cultural context, where the local people interpret and live out what it means for Christ to be Lord of their world.
8. It may be that each world religion needs a separate approach with regard to offering the gospel when it comes to the point of proclamation. Certainly Islam presents more difficulties than Buddhism or Hinduism. But certain principles and ethical questions are universal when seeking to evangelise the poor.
9. There are many remaining questions: What if there is no local church? Or if there is a church but the gospel is obscured? Or a local church under oppression or

limited by law? What if you cannot find Christians to staff development projects?
Can non-Christians of goodwill contribute to the Christian mission?

The Rev. Alan Nichols is an executive with World Vision Australia. [p. 152](#)

The Tribe of Martha and Priscilla

Beulah Wood

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As a mother of four daughters and with wide experience in ministry to women and men in Asia, the author writes with feeling on the suffering of the disadvantaged half of humanity. The clarity of her case, enhanced by telling stories and statistics needs little introduction. Her plea that women be given a greater role in friendship evangelism, discipling and in shared church leadership cannot be ignored by our readers (who are mostly men!).

Editor

I speak to you today, a product of my own western background, with the additional advantage of years living in Asia, of studying the word of God, and of travel and reading through working for an international aid organization. I cannot escape my cultural bias. None of us can or needs to. Your perspective enriches me, as I hope my perspective enriches you.

Ever since I first reached the shores of this great country of India as a newly-wed 25 years ago, I've been on a journey of discovery on how life is for women, here or anywhere else in the world, and looking at whether the actuality is what our loving God intended.

I. THE DISADVANTAGED HALF OF HUMANITY

The first time I saw women planting rice I reacted as a tourist. 'Oh, isn't that pretty with all the brightly coloured sarees of the line of women in the paddy field! Where's my camera?' Later I understood the mud, the heat, the back-ache, the perspiration, the repetitive drudgery. I pitied the women in the fields.

Then, years later, one July in Nepal, I watched young women [p. 153](#) pass my door with back-loads of rice seedlings to plant that day. Martha who worked in my house chatted to them. 'Isn't she lucky to have such easy work with me?' I thought. 'Or, no, perhaps I'll ask her. "Which would you rather do, Martha?" ' 'Work in the fields,' she smiled. And my respect for the women of Asia grew. They can work excessively hard and be proud of it.

When my husband Brian and I went walking in Nepal, one conversation was repeated over and over. It was our best opener as a chance to talk about our God. 'Is this your family? Daughters. Ek, dui, tin, char,' the people would count. 'No son?' 'No son,' Brian would reply. 'We love girls as much as boys and we have a God who loves girls as much as boys.' And the questioner would look blank, thinking we had our Nepali words muddled. That was two incomprehensible statements—a God who loved, and a God who loved girls as much as boys. Not possible.