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The Gospel in Historical Reception

'you welcomed the message with joy…' 1 Thessalonians 1:6

Timothy C. Tennent

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I Introduction

Central to the theological reflection of the Lausanne movement has always been the realization that the gospel is rooted in real history and the gospel has been received within particular historical cultural contexts through the ages. The gospel cannot be properly understood in a vacuum or in isolation from the history of those who have 'welcomed the message with joy'. The purpose of this essay is to see how our history fits into the larger context of Christian history and how this has affected what Christians mean by the word 'gospel'.

II A Framework For Understanding *Christian* History

One of the great contributions of the Lausanne movement to the larger ecumenical movement has been the focus on Christian history, not merely church history. Church history tends to focus on particular denominations and confessional movements identified by various churches through the ages. Christian history, in contrast, seeks to capture a larger perspective and examines the overall movement of Christianity as a world movement. To understand this perspective, three key themes will be addressed: the advance and recession motif, the cross-cultural transmission of the gospel and the shift in the ethnic and geographic diversity of the world Christian movement.

1 Advance and Recession

One of the peculiar features of the spread of Christianity is that it has been characterized primarily by serial, not progressive, growth. In other words, Christianity has not had an even, steady growth beginning with a central, cultural and geographic centre from which it subsequently spread to its present position as the largest,

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most ethnically diverse religion in the world.

Instead, Christian history has been one of advance and recession. Christian history has witnessed powerful penetrations of the gospel into certain geographic and cultural regions, only to later experience a major recession in that region and, sometimes, even wither away almost to extinction. However, just as Christianity was waning in one quarter, it was experiencing an even more dramatic rebirth and expansion in another.

This advance-and-recession theme is such a major feature in Christian history that the eminent church historian Kenneth Scott Latourette uses it as a major organizing theme for his famous multivolume work, *A History of Christianity*.[1] The important point is to recognize that despite what it feels like when a Christian is living in the midst of a particular cultural and geographic advance, if you step back and look at the whole picture of Christian history then you must be forced to conclude that there is no such thing as a particular Christian culture or Christian civilization.

This picture is in stark contrast to what one observes, for example, in Islam or in Hinduism, the two largest religions after Christianity. Islam initially emerged in Saudi Arabia, and from that geographic and cultural centre Islam has spread all over the world. Today, there are far more non-Arab Muslims than Arab Muslims. Yet, despite its diversity, Islam retains a distinctly Arab orientation. Devout Muslims insist that the Qur'an is untranslatable into any language other than Arabic. The call to prayer goes out in Arabic, regardless of the national language of the surrounding Muslims. All Muslims face towards Mecca when they pray. All of these are important indicators that Islam has had a progressive, not serial, growth. It has always enjoyed a single cultural and geographic centre in Saudi Arabia and has never been forced to fully embrace cultural translatability.

Hinduism emerged in the Gangetic plain of North India over three thousand years ago, making it one of the oldest religions in the world. Yet, Hinduism has never lost its cultural and geographic centre in North India. Just as Islam can hardly be imagined apart from Saudi Arabia, the home of the holy city of Mecca, the Ka'ba, the black stone and the tomb of Muhammad in Medina, so it is difficult to imagine a Hinduism which withers away in India, but finds a new centre in, say, sub-Saharan Africa.

Yet, this is precisely what has happened repeatedly in the history of the Christian movement. As Christians in the twenty-first century we are experiencing the most dramatic advance and recession in the history of the world Christian movement. However, in order to understand this phenomenon, we need to see it within the historical context of the second major theme; namely, the cross-cultural transmission of the gospel. Within this theme, three examples will be highlighted.

1 Kenneth Scott Latourette, *A History of Christianity*, vols. 1 and 2 (Peabody: Prince Press, 2000).

2 The Cross Cultural Transmission of the Gospel

a) From Jewish Birth to Gentile Home

Christianity began as a Jewish movement fulfilling Jewish hopes, promises and expectations. Indeed, the continuity between Judaism and Christianity seemed so seamless to the earliest believers that they would have never thought of themselves as changing their religion from Judaism to something else. They understood Christianity as the extension and fulfilment of their Jewish faith.

Yet, right in the pages of the New Testament we read the story of those unnamed Jewish believers in Antioch who took the risky and very controversial move to cross major cultural and religious barriers and share the gospel with pagan, uncircumcised Gentiles. Acts 11:19 begins by recounting how, after the persecution in connection with Stephen, these scattered believers began to share the gospel 'as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus and Antioch, telling the message only to Jews'. The very next verse records one of the most important missiological moments in the entire New Testament: 'Some of them, however, men from Cyprus and Cyrene, went to Antioch and *began to speak to Greeks also*, telling them the good news about the Lord Jesus'.

This is the beginning of a new cultural frontier which, though radical at the time, would soon become so prominent that it would be considered normative Christianity. At the time that these unnamed believers from Cyprus and Cyrene began to preach the gospel to Gentiles, the church was comprised of Jewish believers and a few Gentile God-fearers like Cornelius and the Ethiopian eunuch who had accepted the Torah. In other words, the Gentile God-fearers had accepted the Jewish messiah as their messiah and were living out their new faith on Jewish terms. The cultural centre of this young, fledgling movement, known simply as 'the Way' (Acts 9:2; 19:23; 24:14), was based in Jerusalem under apostolic leadership. Jerusalem was the first geographic centre of the Christian movement and Judaism was its first religious and cultural home.

The importance of Jerusalem is underscored by what happened when news got back to Jerusalem about this surprising turning to Christ among Gentiles. The apostles in Jerusalem sent Barnabas down to Antioch to investigate this new movement. Later, Paul and Barnabas entered into such a sharp disagreement with some Judaizers who strongly opposed the Gentiles coming to Christ apart from Judaism (circumcision, submission to the Torah and dietary restrictions among other things) that Paul travelled to Jerusalem to make his case before the apostles.

The Jerusalem Council met to debate and to discuss the basis for accepting Gentiles into the church. The group decided, of course, that Gentiles did not need to come to Jesus Christ on Jewish cultural and religious terms. They were not asked to submit to or to keep the many intricacies of the Jewish law, but only to respect a few broad guidelines which would clearly separate the Gentiles from their pagan past, while still affirming that sinners are saved not by keeping the law, but by faith in Jesus Christ. The Jewish 'cen-

tre' formally recognized the presence of Christ in these new Gentile brothers and sisters. Since this 'Way' now included Gentiles on their own cultural terms, it could no longer regard itself as a curious subset of Judaism. The faith had successfully traversed its first major cross-cultural transmission.

b) The Fall of the Empire

The turn of the fourth century in the Roman Empire was marked by the most brutal persecution the church had ever experienced. Emperor Diocletian ordered the destruction of church buildings and Bibles, and he imprisoned many Christian leaders. However, all of this changed when his successor Constantine issued the Edict of Toleration in A.D. 313. In the decades which followed, Christianity experienced dramatic expansion among Hellenistic Gentiles until Christianity soon became the 'professed faith of the overwhelming majority of the population of the Roman empire'.[2] In fact, Christianity became almost conterminous with the empire.

According to Stephen Neill, the estimated number of Christians in the empire on the eve of the Edict of Toleration was approximately five million (10% of the population) and by the time Emperor Justinian officially closed the School of Athens in 529 the number of Christians was closer to 25 million.[3] Greek-speaking peoples with a Hellenistic culture and a pagan background were now the best example of *representative* Christianity. Indeed, by the fourth century, Jewish Christians represented only a tiny percentage of the church.

Throughout the fourth century the Roman Empire increasingly showed signs of weakness and disintegration. Tragically, the moral and spiritual climate of nominal Christianity generally mirrored that of the declining empire, as the church, during this period, was either focused on internal doctrinal disputes (as reflected in the ecumenical councils) or Christians had become part of monastic communities which were not interested in revitalizing Roman civilization. The post-Constantinian Christian movement became culturally triumphalistic and spiritually decadent. Looking back, Christianity might have shared the same demise as the empire, symbolized best by the famous sacking of Rome by the Goths in 410.

Remarkably, however, Christianity found new vitality outside the empire, among new people groups westward in Ireland and Scotland and eastward into Arabia, Persia and beyond. St. Patrick arrived in Ireland around A.D. 432, Columba founded his famous monastery in Iona in 563, and Aidan founded Lindisfarne in Northumbria in 635. Many of the invading Germanic peoples were also brought to faith in Jesus Christ.

In a matter of a few decades the church was facing another new cultural shock with the entrance of Visigoths (Spain), Ostrogoths (Italy), Franks (Northern Gaul), Burgundians (Southern Gaul), Vandals (N. Africa), Angles and Saxons (Britain), all enter-

2 Latourette, *A History of Christianity*, vol. 1, 97.

3 Latourette, *A History of Christianity*, vol. 1, 269; see also Stephen Neill, *A History of Christian Missions* (London: Penguin Books, 1990), 39, 41.

ing the church in significant numbers. Centuries later, this pattern would repeat itself. The relatively stable Carolingian empire, which had substantially been Christianized, eventually disintegrated, and a new wave of invasions began with the arrival of the Scandinavians, who were also, in turn, evangelized.

Not only was Christianity continually making cultural gains on one hand while suffering losses on the other hand, but the geographic centre was also shifting. By the end of the second century, Rome, as capital of the empire, was the most important city for Christians. Indeed, even in the structure of the book of Acts, we are already beginning to see the strategic and cultural importance of Rome for Christians. However, in 330 Constantine relocated the capital to Byzantium (modern day Istanbul), which he renamed Constantinople. By the time Rome was sacked in 410, Constantinople was the undisputed geographic centre of the Christian faith. Christianity experienced some remarkable advances in the East during this time, including important progress among the Slavic peoples.

During the ninth and tenth centuries, when Christianity in the West had reached dangerously low levels of faith and practice, Constantinople represented the most vibrant expression of Christianity in the world. In fact, the Russian ruler Vladimir was so moved by what he experienced in Constantinople that he sponsored the propagation of Eastern Christianity throughout Russia. Christianity, it seems, was becoming accustomed to reinvigorating its vitality and inner life through cross cultural transmission to new people groups and the ability to adapt to new cultural and geographic centres.

c) A Faith for the World

The Protestant Reformation led by Luther (1483-1546), along with the Roman Catholic Counter-Reformation led by Ignatius Loyola (1491-1556), represent renewal movements which helped to stimulate new vitality among previously Christianized peoples who had become largely nominal. Christianity in the Middle Ages was still confined primarily to Europe, which remained the geographic centre. However, a revitalized European Christianity eventually led to dramatic missionary endeavours which brought the gospel to many new people groups, including most of Latin America and many new people groups of Asia.

Fuelled by missionary activity in the wake of the *Padroado* (1493), the Papal decree which divided the world between Spain and Portugal, initially giving Spain exclusive rights to the New World in the West and Portugal the rights to the East, the Roman Catholic Church in 1622 founded the *Sacra Congregatio de Propaganda Fide*. Its purposes were to assist in training new missionaries, to oversee all Roman Catholic missionary work, and to coordinate major new missionary initiatives in non-Roman catholic regions of the world. Eventually the Protestants, beginning with the Moravians and later through the creation of dozens of new mission-sending societies, followed with their own missionary initiatives. The nineteenth century missionaries would plant the seeds for a future twenty-first century Christian

harvest beyond anything they could have imagined during their lifetimes.

However, quite apart from missionaries committed to sharing their faith across cultural and geographic lines, Europe itself was engaged in the largest ocean-based migration in the history of the world. From 1500 until the middle of the twentieth century, millions of Europeans relocated to the new world, bringing their faith with them and spawning the birth of massive new populations, largely Christian. The gospel, once again, proved that it was culturally and geographically translatable. Soon the English-speaking world, including Britain and North America, became the most important new centre of vibrant Christianity.

d) Living on the Seam of History

The purpose of these brief snapshots is to underscore the fact that the lifeblood of Christianity is found in its ability to translate itself across new cultural and geographic barriers and to recognize that areas which once were the mission field can, over time, become the very heart of Christian vitality, while those areas which were once at the heart can lose the very faith they once espoused. Jerusalem, Antioch, North Africa and Constantinople were all at one time at the centre of Christian vibrancy. Yet all of these places have only a very tiny remnant of Christianity remaining and, with the exception of Jerusalem, are almost completely Islamic.[4] In contrast, places like Lagos, Nigeria and Seoul, S. Korea, where the presence of Christianity at one time seemed almost unimaginable, are today vibrant centres of Christian faith.[5]

Augustine witnessed the barbarian invasions, realized their significance, and produced his classic *City of God*. William Carey lived at one of these seams of history and produced his influential *Enquiry*. We now live at another one of these great seams in the history of the world Christian movement and, as I have learned over the past twenty years teaching in two seminaries, one in the US and one in India, God is raising up new voices who will move beyond merely lamenting the emergence of a post-Christian West.

But will we be able to articulate the significance of the remarkable re-discovery of Christianity—the re-discovery of a Christianity which is simultaneously more ancient and more shockingly fresh, a Christianity which is both post-western and trans-western? Christianity is being re-discovered apart from the West, but due to dramatically changing immigration patterns into North America and Europe

4 Bat Ye'or, *The Decline of Eastern Christianity Under Islam: From Jihad to Dhimmitude* (London: Associated University Press, 1996).

5 Bill Bowder, 'Worship Numbers Fall Again', *Church Times*, found at <http://churchtimes.co.uk/templates/NewsTemplate_1>, accessed 26 August, 2008. In fact, there are more Anglicans in Nigeria alone than the whole of Europe. Ruth Gledhill, 'Archbishop Thanks Africa for Lessons on Faith', *The Times* (London), 26 July 2003, 20; Charlotte Allen, 'Episcopal Church Plays Russian Roulette on the Gay Issue', *Los Angeles Times*, 10 August 2003, M-1; Dianne Knippers, 'The Anglican Mainstream: It's Not Where Americans Might Think', *Weekly Standard*, 25 August 2003.

and the growth of Christianity in so many different parts of the world, even the language of 'Southern Christianity' may yet be inadequate to describe what is happening.

3 The Seismic Shift

The most evident sign that we are living on a 'seam' of some new historical epoch of Christian history is the rise of the 'Majority World' church and the signs of the possible, although once unthinkable, demise of western Christianity. Therefore, this deserves more careful scrutiny. Evidence of this development is seen, for example, when we observe where the majority of Christians are now located around the world.

After its birth in Asia, Christianity had its most vigorous growth as it moved steadily westward and northward. As more and more people in the West embraced Christianity, Europe and, eventually, North America became the heartland of the world Christian movement. However, beginning in 1900, Christianity has experienced dramatic growth in the south and east, away from the traditional locus of where the majority of Christians were located for over a thousand years.

For the first time since the Protestant Reformation the majority of Christians (approximately 67%) are now located outside the western world. Some specific examples of how the church is changing will, perhaps, help to illustrate this shift better. At the turn of the twentieth century the Christian church was predominately white and western. In 1900, there were over 380 million Christians in Europe and less than ten million on the entire continent of Africa.[6] Today there are over 367 million Christians in Africa, comprising one fifth of the entire Christian church. Throughout the twentieth century a net average gain of 16,500 people were coming to Christ every day in Africa. From 1970 to 1985, for example, the church in Africa grew by over six million people. During that same time, 4,300 people per day were leaving the church in Europe and North America.[7]

The church is not just moving southward, it is also moving eastward. In South Korea, for example, despite the fact that Christianity was not formally introduced within the country itself until the eighteenth century, it is staggering to realize that today there are over 20 million Christians in South Korea alone. In fact, South Korea is widely regarded as the home of the modern church growth movement, exemplified by the remarkable story of the Yoido Full Gospel Church pastored by Dr. David Cho. Founded in 1958 with only five people in a small living

6 The *World Christian Database* notes that there were 380,641,890 Christians in Europe and 9,938,588 Christians in Africa. See http://worldchristiandatabase.org/wcd/esweb.asp?WCI=Results&Query=415, accessed 26 August, 2008.

7 Lamin Sanneh, *Whose Religion is Christianity?: The Gospel Beyond the West* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 15. Elizabeth Isichei says that the number leaving the church in the West is 7,500 per day. See Elizabeth Isichei, *A History of Christianity in Africa* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 1. See also Dana Robert, 'Shifting Southward: Global Christianity since 1945', *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 24 no. 2 (April 2000), 53.

room, the church now claims over 700,000 members, making it easily the largest church in the world.

India has been called the cradle of the world's religions, having given birth to Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism and Sikhism. Yet, today, this land of exotic eastern religions is also the home of over 60 million Christians.[8] Church planting in India, particularly in the traditionally Hindu north, is taking place at a blistering pace so that many missiologists are predicting that by the year 2050 India will have over 126 million Christians.[9] However, even Korea and India cannot match the dramatic rise of the church in China. Even as recently as Mao Zedong's (Tse-tung) famous Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) there were only about one million Christians in China. Today, the Chinese church comprises over 90 million believers and is the fastest growing church on the planet.[10]

Western scholars and liberal Christians have long predicted the demise of historic Christianity and the rise of the 'secular city'.[11] Their solution has been to call the church to abandon faith in the supernatural and the historic confessions of the Christian faith. They have argued that doctrines such as the deity of Christ, the Trinity and the authority of the Bible are no longer credible or believable in the modern world. Therefore, Christianity should conform to the norms of western secularism. However, it seems that rather than saving Christianity, secular, relativistic forces are quickly turning twenty-first century mainline liberal Protestantism into a curious aberration, a mere footnote, in the larger story of the advance of global Christianity.

In contrast, the dramatic rise of Majority World Christianity is to a large extent morally and theologically conservative. These new Christians believe the Bible, are Christ centred, and are supernaturalistic. Philip Jenkins' study of Majority World Christianity found, in contrast to their western counterparts, that they have a 'much greater respect for the authority of scripture', especially the Old Testament and the book of James, and 'a special interest in supernatural elements of scripture, such as miracles, visions, and healings', and they also believe in

8 Todd M. Johnson, Sarah Tieszen and Thomas Higgens, 'Counting Christians in India, AD 52-2200', an unpublished research report produced by the Center for the Study of Global Christianity, the research center at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary which produces the *World Christian Encyclopedia*. This represents 6.15% of the population of India, far above the official 3% figure given by the government. However, the official figures disenfranchise millions of Christians who are counted as 'tribals' or who are remaining within Hindu communities.

9 This is the current projection of the Center for the Study of Global Christianity. This will represent 8.94% of the population of India.

10 Barrett, Kurian and Johnson, *World Christian Encyclopedia*, 191.

11 See John Spong, *Why Christianity Must Change or Die* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1999), 29-42; Harvey Cox, *The Secular City: Secularization and Urbanization in Theological Perspective* (New York: MacMillan Press, 1966). But see Harvey Cox, *Fire from Heaven: The Rise of Pentecostal Spirituality and the Reshaping of Religion in the Twenty-first Century* (Reading: Addison-Wesley Publishing Co., 1995), xvi.

the 'continuing power of prophecy'.[12]

As Peter Berger has said, 'To put it simply, experiments with secularized religion have generally failed; religious movements with beliefs and practices dripping with reactionary supernaturalism have widely succeeded'.[13] The French writer Gilles Kepel has aptly called this dramatic turnaround the 'revenge of God' (*la revanche de Dieu*).[14] As Harvey Cox has noted, 'if God really did die, as Nietzche's madman proclaimed, then why have so many billions of people not gotten the word?'[15] There is a global Christian revolution happening outside the western world, and most western Christians are only gradually beginning to realize the full implications of this shift.

III Cultural receptions of the Gospel

1 The 'Gospel' and Cultural Embodiments

If the gospel does not exist in a vacuum, but must become manifest in particular contexts, then it raises the question as to how the very word 'gospel' has undergone change in the midst of the emerging new cultural receptions and embodiments. Have Christians changed their understanding of what the word 'gospel' means and, if so, what is the nature of these transformations?

a) Christendom and post-Christendom

'Christendom' refers to a political and ecclesiastical arrangement which reinforces a partnership between the church and the state. The state strengthens the church by promoting Christian hegemony over religious and cultural life. The church, in turn, gives legitimacy to the state by supporting the ruler and tacitly implying divine sanction on the actions of the state. In the context of Christendom, Christianity receives protection from the civil authorities (eg, the English monarch has the title, 'Defender of the Faith') and receives many privileges because it is the 'established' religion of the realm.

The classic phrase was '*Cuius regio, eius religio*', broadly meaning, the faith of the ruler was the religion of the realm. The ruler was responsible for the spiritual welfare of his or her people; the ruler decides how they will worship, and in his or her dominion uniformity of faith and practice is considered normal. To embrace a different faith was to be a 'dissenter' with all of the explicit and implicit sanctions that term implied. Because of the connection with the state, Christendom often (even unconsciously), regarded the Christian faith in territorial ways. To belong to the 'realm' means, by definition, that you shared the faith of the 'realm'. Particular embodiments of the gospel were, therefore, linked to specific geographic regions and, tragi-

12 See Philip Jenkins, *The New Faces of Christianity: Believing the Bible in the Global South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 4, 53, 54, 60-62.

13 Berger, 'Desecularization of the World', 4.

14 As quoted in Cox, *Fire from Heaven*, xvii. See Gilles Kepel, *The Revenge of God* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1994).

15 Kepel, *The Revenge of God*, 103.

cally, became unduly linked with nationalistic identities.

Christendom has existed in both official, explicit ways as well an unofficial, implicit expressions. In certain regions, most notably Europe and Latin America, Christianity was constitutionally granted special status and, therefore, we find Christendom its most explicit expression. In other regions, such as the United States, there is an official separation between church and state. The U.S. Constitution does not sanction a particular version of Christianity, but, nevertheless, it found innumerable ways to extend special status to Christianity over other non-Christian religions. State funerals take place in the National Cathedral, God's name is invoked in public speeches and biblical texts are quoted on public occasions, and so forth. Even in unofficial Christendom, society is frequently committed to a civil religion as a kind of societal consensus which affords Christianity a privileged status within the broader society.

Protestantism originated as a movement within the larger context of European Christianity and, therefore, was born in the context of Christendom. This profoundly influenced the way the word 'gospel' was understood. To be a Christian within a Christendom arrangement is to see Christianity at the centre of all public discourse. Evangelism occurs passively because Christianity is the prevailing plausibility structure.

Christianity is the normative expression of religious faith and ethical action and there are no major dissenting voices or alternative religious worldviews. Therefore, the 'gospel' does not need to robustly defend itself against, for example, either secular atheism or some alternative religious worldview such as Islam or Hinduism. Islamic or Hindu counter-claims are virtually non-existent in Christendom. The most frequently found encounters which Christendom-type Christianity has with non-Christian faiths are when it has engaged them as a cultural 'other' in military campaigns (such as the Crusades) or in sponsoring a missionary who, often unwittingly, transmitted the gospel and the host culture in a single package.

Today the 'gospel' has to be rediscovered in the West apart from Christendom. We can learn much from many of our Majority World brothers and sisters who have learned over many centuries how to live out their faith as a minority faith or, often, in the context where there is a state sponsored religion other than Christianity.

Many countries with a predominately Islamic population have their own version of 'Christendom'. However, rather than calling it something like 'Islamicdom', it is often best observed by the presence of Islamic Sharia as the governing arrangement and which, effectively, merges 'mosque and state'. Even in a place like India which is governed by a secular constitution, Hinduism consistently receives special recognition and protection. Similar examples could be given with countries like Bhutan, Nepal or Thailand.

What are the implications of this for how the 'gospel' is understood? Several examples can be given.

First, the gospel must be invested with a renewed capacity to critique culture, not just accommodate it. Only

when the gospel is freed from the chains of Christendom can it provide the necessary critique of the state and the prevailing culture which is required when the kingdoms of this world clash with the lordship of Jesus Christ.

Second, the gospel must become more robust in responding to very specific challenges which hitherto went unnoticed. In a Christendom context, the challenges of unbelief or from other religions are distant and remote. Therefore, the gospel gradually becomes domesticated and weakened. Today we are witnessing the rise of many new challenges all around us: post-modern relativistic secularism, the rise of Islamic fundamentalism, the seeping pluralism of Hinduism, to name a few. These challenges will inevitably force faithful Christians to become far more articulate about what constitutes genuine Christian identity.

Third, evangelism has to become more intentional and one cannot assume that any of the dominant Christian paradigms of the last century are widely understood. Even basic religious categories like 'God' or 'sin' or 'faith' which once sat very comfortably within the security of a mono-religious discourse must now be explained and clarified.

Tertullian famously once asked, 'What has Athens to do with Jerusalem . . . what has the academy to do with the church?'[16] Tertullian envisioned a culture with the revelation of God's word at the centre. Divine self-disclosure is seen to trump all other knowledge and discourse. In this sense 'Jerusalem' represents a society framed by revelation and, therefore, theological and cultural stability. 'Jerusalem' represents a congregation of the faithful gathered to hear God's word, the centrality of the pulpit, and the one-way pronouncements which are issued 'six feet above contradiction'. In contrast, 'Athens' represents dialogue and speculation. 'Athens' is the place of religious pluralism and dialogic speculation.

Today, we must recognize that we are no longer proclaiming the gospel from the 'Temple Mount' of our 'Jerusalem'. Instead, we are seeking to persuade the gospel into people's lives in the midst of the raucous, pluralistic, experimental, sceptical environment of the 'Mars Hill of their "Athens"'. There are competing deities and revelations which clamour for attention. The gospel which we proclaim is largely 'unknown' and our witness may need to find collaborative help from general revelation to gain a hearing for the gospel.

b) Modernity and post-modernity

The second cultural embodiment which must be examined is how the 'gospel' is understood in the context of modernity and post-modernity. Peter Kuzmic, the internationally renowned leader from Eastern Europe, and plenary speaker for Lausanne II in Manila, once commented that the most defining word of our time is the word 'post'. We live in a *post*-communist, *post*-Christendom, *post*-denominational, *post*-western, *post*-Enlightenment and *post*-modern world.

16 Tertullian, *De Praescriptione Haereticorum* 7.9.

One of the earliest writers to recognize the collapse of modernity and the movement towards a post-Enlightenment world was the French philosopher Jean-François Lyotard in his 1979 article entitled, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*.[17] In the article, he coined the word 'post-modern' in the way that it is used in today's discourse. He stated that the fundamental shift of our time as western civilization is a growing crisis of truth.[18] In the modern world there was a belief in an overarching truth—whether informed by a Christian world-view or even a secular belief in progress and the perfectibility of humanity. Lyotard argued that modern societies produced order and stability by generating what he called 'grand narratives' or 'master narratives'. These grand narratives provide a clear sense of '*telos*' of destiny. Intellectual reflection was the embarking on a journey with a clear destination—the pursuit of truth.

In contrast, the *post*-modern context is marked by a collapse of all grand narratives. Post-modernism marks the movement away from claims to objectivity and a greater emphasis on fragmented forms and discontinuous narratives. In short, the very notion of truth as Truth has begun to collapse. There is no longer a cohesive 'canopy of truth' or meta-narrative which gives meaning and purpose to our civilization. We are left only with our personal narratives. The only 'truth' which remains is what is true 'for me' with little courage or confidence remaining to state anything with certainty which is true for everyone or speaks about objective truth. To use the language of Lesslie Newbigin, in post-modernism there are no more 'public facts', all we have left are 'personal preferences'.[19]

Looking back from this perspective, it is easy to see how the evangelical understanding of the gospel has been influenced by Enlightenment thinking. On the positive side, the gospel benefited from the notion of a meta-narrative and the idea of a final, all encompassing '*telos*' to which all of human history was moving. The Christian meta-narrative and final goal of history may have been different from that of the Enlightenment, but, at least the paradigm was there to build on. On the negative side, the over emphasis on reason sometimes produced hyper-rational expressions of Christianity. Furthermore, the deeply imbedded notions of human progress often caused evangelicals not to take sin seriously enough and to render the 'gospel' as nothing more than the greatest 'self-help' plan.

How is post-modernism influencing the evangelical understanding of the gospel? What implications does this have for Christian mission?

It is clear that post-modernism

17 Jean-Francois Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 1985).

18 For a brilliant analysis of this trend and the implications of it for the contemporary church, see David F. Wells, *No Place for Truth* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993) and *Above All Earthly Pow'rs: Christ in a Postmodern World* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005).

19 This is one of the central arguments in Lesslie Newbigin's *Foolishness to the Greeks*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986).

poses a number of serious challenges to the gospel. First, post-modernism erodes the very concept of objective truth rooted in God's self-revelation. Therefore, the authority of the Bible, the trustworthiness of expository preaching and the call to repentance, to name just a few, all suffer. Second, post-modernism's emphasis on personal narrative separate from any overarching meta-narrative has further pushed the church towards a privatized understanding of the gospel. Under the sway of post-modernism, the gospel loses its historical, missional and cosmic dimensions and through a radical kind of reductionism becomes merely a prescription for obtaining personal peace.

Third, post-modernism's emphasis on the autonomy of personal choices has further pushed the church towards a full acceptance of marketing strategies for attracting new believers, business models for long-term planning and strategy and a general entertainment orientation because in this new world the 'consumer is king'. Once the gospel must be made 'fun', then there is little room for the prophetic imagination, the cost of discipleship, and the call to repentance.

In response, the church must regain confidence in the truth of the gospel of Jesus Christ. We need a fresh understanding of the rule and reign of God as the great eschatological fact to which all history is moving. The wonderful thing about the biblical vision of the *eschaton* is that it simultaneously trumps the modernist notions of human progress as well as the post-modern malaise about any ultimate meaning at all. We need a renewed call to repentance, a *metanoia* about what it means to be the people of God called to mission.

Finally, and this is one of the great contributions of the Lausanne movement, we need to discover deeper ecumenism which looks beyond our own institutional aggrandizement and to discover that overarching evangelical unity which can move the church forward in the face of the challenges of our day.

c) One centre and multiple centres of universality

We are now observing something unique in Christian history, the emergence of what John Mbiti has called *multiple* new 'centres of universality'.[20] This means that for the first time in history, the gospel is simultaneously emerging with strength in multiple different cultural centres. It is not as if the gospel is emerging with vitality only in sub-Saharan Africa. It is also emerging with renewed vitality in Korea, China, India and even Latin America. We now have *multiple* centres of universality.

For the first time, this means that the gospel can no longer be identified primarily with one cultural centre. This will inevitably enhance the universality of the gospel and it will also simultaneously enhance the need for greater cultural sensitivity, global partnerships and cooperation, all things which are the hallmarks of the Lausanne movement. The day has finally arrived when we can say that the church of Jesus Christ on every continent is both

20 As quoted in Kwame Bediako, *Christianity in Africa: The Renewal of a Non-Western Religion* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1995), 157.

sending missionaries and receiving missionaries. This new reality has been captured well by Samuel Escobar in his book, *The New Global Mission: The Gospel from Everywhere to Everyone*.[21] The phrase, 'from everywhere to everyone' precisely describes the new situation we are in.

The other major development is that the demographics are transforming even the former heartlands of Christianity. Immigration patterns are slowly transforming the face of Christianity even in North America and Europe. The fastest growing Christian groups in North America and Europe are the non-white, non-European peoples. African, Chinese, Korean, Indian and Hispanic churches, to name a few, are springing up all across America in unprecedented numbers.

What are the implications of this for the 'gospel'? First of all, the gospel must be re-discovered as a post-western faith. The gospel has been overly identified with the West for so long that we cannot even imagine all the ways the gospel has been unwittingly domesticated by its long sojourn with western culture. The church all over the globe, (even in the so-called post-Christian West), must re-discover the gospel as a post-western faith.

Second, even though the *geographic* centre of global Christianity has moved, this has not dramatically changed the fact that in terms of theological training, finances, book publications, to name a few, the West continues to play a central and vital role. Nevertheless, it is very unusual that the very place which boasts the strongest educational centres for theological education (namely, Western Europe and N. America) is also the very centre where Christianity is declining the fastest. This is another new situation the church is facing.

All of this has profound implications for missions in the twenty-first century. We are in danger of becoming what John Mbiti calls 'kerygmatically universal' while remaining 'theologically provincial'.[22] In other words, the global centres of the church's vibrant proclamation are becoming increasingly diverse, whereas theological reflection continues to be dominated by western scholarship. Mbiti's point was that even though 'the centres of the Church's universality are no longer in Geneva, Rome, Athens, Paris, London or New York' but are now in 'Kinshasa, Buenos Aires, Addis Ababa and Manila', there has not been the corresponding shift towards 'mutuality and reciprocity in the theological task facing the universal church'.[23]

This means that the church in the West must re-think our missionary role beyond first generation gospel work of evangelism and church planting and also think about our role in helping to stimulate theological training institutions and encouraging indigenous theological writing, and so forth. The

21 Samuel Escobar, *The New Global Mission: The Gospel from Everywhere to Everyone* (Grand Rapids: InterVarsity Press, 2003).

22 John S. Mbiti, 'Theological Impotence and the Universality of the Church', in Gerald H. Anderson and Thomas F. Stransky, eds., *Mission Trends No. 3: Third World Theologies* (New York: Paulist Press, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976), 6.

23 Mbiti, 'Theological Impotence', 9, 10; Bediako, *Christianity in Africa*, 154.

West itself will be increasingly in need of first generation gospel work and the Majority World will increasingly need second and third generation gospel work.

Finally, we must learn to re-think how the gospel is transmitted to new people-groups. This is another unique feature in the history of Christian expansion. There are very few examples in Christian history where a people group with less power and economic strength have brought the gospel to a people group with greater power and greater economic strength. Throughout Christian history, the gospel has almost uniformly been shared by people with greater economic and political power to those with less power and resources. To this day, the very word 'missions' in the minds of many people is synonymous with economic assistance and various ministry of mercy.

However, today, the emerging dominant paradigm is that people groups from under developed countries are likely to produce the greatest number of cross-cultural missionaries. This means that the traditional ways in which missions has been supported will no longer be viable. It will probably mean a dramatic rise in self-supporting and/or bi-vocational missionaries from around the world, closer to the eighteenth century Moravian model than the twentieth century faith missions model.

IV Conclusion

This essay has provided a broad historical framework for helping us to understand the nature of our time. It is clear that the church is undergoing another major 'advance and recession' motif and we are caught in the middle (or on the seam) between a 'western recession' and a 'non-western advance'. Living during the transition between two major historical epochs is always fraught with a sense of disequilibrium and special challenges. The Lausanne movement is uniquely poised to reflect on these changes and to serve as a bridge between important conversations going on by Christians all over the world.

This essay has also sought to understand how these historical changes are influencing how Christians, particularly evangelicals, have understood the gospel. We have seen that the gospel is, to use the language of Andrew Walls, both the 'prisoner' and the 'liberator' of culture. On the one hand, the gospel's transformative work transcends any cultural particularities. On the other hand, it is clear that the gospel message has often been domesticated because of its long sojourn within a particular cultural context. This essay highlighted three major shifts in how the word 'gospel' is now being understood in a post-Christendom, post-modern, multi-cantered Christian movement.

Because we are living in such an important 'seam' of history, there is wisdom in calling for a period of readjustment and re-assessment. In 1972 the World Council of Churches called for a moratorium on missions. This inadvertently set forces in motion which caused a dramatic decline in missionary commitment around the world. I am not calling for a moratorium, but rather what I prefer to call a 'missions *selah*'. The word *selah* occurs throughout the Psalms. The precise

meaning of the word *selah* is unknown. However, most believe that it signifies some kind of musical pause or interlude. This is precisely what I have in mind.

Western Christians have been accustomed to playing the melody. We directed the orchestra, we decided what pieces would be played and where, and the players were mostly from the West. Now, the orchestra is far more diverse and we are being asked to play 'harmony' not 'melody'. This requires a temporary interlude; a time to pause and re-assess; a time to think about what we are doing in fresh ways.

As a globally representative movement, Lausanne is uniquely poised to help during this transitional interlude. I am convinced that if we are attentive to the refreshing winds of the Holy Spirit during this tumultuous and yet thrilling time, we will have a missiological re-birth where in partnership with the global church, we will see a remarkable rebirth of the church's life and faith like we have not known.