

WHAT HATH WHEATON TO DO WITH NAIROBI? TOWARD CATHOLIC AND EVANGELICAL THEOLOGY

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I. GLOBAL FERMENT

By now, it has become a cliché in most disciplines to refer to the massive shift in Christianity’s center of gravity that has occurred in the past 100 years.¹ Moreover, the same forces of globalization that have helped make this demographic shift possible—easier worldwide travel and communication—have also served to connect people across the miles with increasing frequency and ease. The result of these shifts is plainly affecting evangelical institutions; for example, evangelical churches have engaged in new partnerships with Christians around the globe,² and evangelical schools have recently hired leaders who have promised to increase the connections between their institution and the rest of the church.³

Until recently, however, North American evangelical biblical scholars and theologians have generally not paid great attention to the question of how Christianity’s changing face should affect theology and biblical interpretation.⁴ They are the anomaly when compared to other groups; the Theological Education Fund (a World Council of Churches entity) popularized “contextualization” as a theological project more than 40 years ago, and this set in motion an ongoing effort to rework theological commitments and literature in light of the changing face of Christianity. Before that, Vatican II encouraged a similar trajectory among Roman Catholics,

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¹ Mark Hutchinson and John Wolffe, *A Short History of Global Evangelicalism* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012); Donald M. Lewis and Richard V. Pierard, eds., *Global Evangelicalism: Theology, History and Culture in Regional Perspective* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2014). Since “evangelical” is a disputed term, let it be noted that I am using the term as it is defined in Timothy Larsen, “Defining and Locating Evangelicalism,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Evangelical Theology* (ed. Timothy Larsen and Daniel J. Treier; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007) 1–14.

² For example, several evangelical megachurches, including Saddleback Church and Harvest Bible Chapel, have a score of satellite campuses in as many nations in Africa, Asia, and Latin America.

³ To cite just two examples, the recently installed presidents of two evangelical bastions—Asbury Theological Seminary and Wheaton College—have both pledged to make engagement with the global church a top priority.

⁴ Of course, there have been a number of exceptions, including several books written and edited by D. A. Carson and William A. Dyrness in the 1980s and 1990s: D. A. Carson, ed., *The Church in the Bible and the World: An International Study* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1987); D. A. Carson, ed., *Teach Us to Pray: Prayer in the Bible and the World* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1990); D. A. Carson, ed., *Right with God: Justification in the Bible and the World* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1992); William A. Dyrness, *Learning About Theology from the Third World* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990); William A. Dyrness, *Invitation to Cross-Cultural Theology: Case Studies in Vernacular Theologies* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992); William A. Dyrness, ed., *Emerging Voices in Global Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994).

with *Lumen Gentium* commending, among other things, a new openness to learning from a variety of cultural contexts.⁵

This lacuna in North American evangelical literature is now beginning to be filled, with the appearance in the past few years of books seeking to take the new face of Christianity seriously. These developments are promising, to be sure, but as this essay will document, the question of how World Christianity should impact evangelical theology and exegesis has remained marginal. That is, while there are increasing pockets of interest in this issue, especially among evangelical scholars in cross-cultural contexts, the shift in the world Christian population has largely failed to make a discernible difference in mainstream evangelical textbooks and scholarship.

This essay will begin by briefly documenting what developments (and lack thereof) currently characterize the literature; in the process, it will highlight through a close reading of a widely used textbook a number of misconceptions that have prevented clear thinking about how theology and exegesis may benefit from consideration of Christianity's diverse manifestations in various cultures. Finally, the essay will offer several brief examples of how evangelical theology and exegesis in North America and Europe could benefit from engaging more regularly with Christian thought and practice in the Majority World.

II. RECENT DEVELOPMENTS

Over the past decade, we have seen the beginnings of change on this score. While in decades past it was only the province of Christian anthropologists and missiologists to discuss the relationship between various cultures and theology, that topic is now occasionally the focus of evangelical theologians' attention.⁶ Recently, several books have sought to establish the significance of the global church for North American evangelical theology,⁷ and two evangelical theologians have begun constructing full-scale systematic theologies that are consciously engaged with theological resources from outside the West.⁸ Similar efforts are afoot in biblical studies,

⁵ For example, Pope Paul VI stated in the 1964 document that missionary engagement should allow that "whatever good lies latent in the religious practices and cultures of diverse peoples, is not only saved from destruction but is also cleansed, raised up and perfected unto the glory of God" (*Lumen Gentium*, http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19641121_lumen-gentium_en.html).

⁶ See, e.g., the collected essays in Jeffrey P. Greenman and Gene L. Green, eds., *Global Theology in Evangelical Perspective: Exploring the Contextual Nature of Theology and Mission* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2012); William A. Dyrness and Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen, eds., *Global Dictionary of Theology: A Resource for the Worldwide Church* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2008); and the essays in part 2 of Timothy Larsen and Daniel J. Treier, eds., *The Cambridge Companion to Evangelical Theology*.

⁷ Craig Ott and Harold A. Netland, eds., *Globalizing Theology: Belief and Practice in an Era of World Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2006); Timothy C. Tennent, *Theology in the Context of World Christianity: How the Global Church Is Influencing the Way We Think About and Discuss Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007); Victor I. Ezigbo, *Introducing Christian Theologies: Voices from Global Communities*, vol. 1 (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2013).

⁸ See the first two volumes of Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen's five-volume systematic theology (*Christ and Reconciliation* [A Constructive Christian Theology for the Pluralistic World 1; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans,

with new biblical commentaries offering evangelical readings of the text from the Majority World,⁹ and a number of recent volumes dedicated to reading the biblical text in global perspective.¹⁰ Bringing biblical scholars and systematic theologians from around the globe together, a new series of textbooks is also being produced in collaboration with the “Scripture and Theology in Global Context” consultations at the Evangelical Theological Society and the Institute for Biblical Research.¹¹

Almost all of these titles have emerged in the past ten years, and this list even leaves aside the voluminous evangelical literature on contextualization.¹² Indeed, what is striking about the current spate of scholarship is that it has largely moved past debates about *whether* evangelicals should contextualize, with most authors acknowledging the cultured, contextual nature of hermeneutical and theological practice.¹³

All of this is surely to the good. It is encouraging to see reflection from North American evangelicals regarding what the changing makeup of the church may mean for theology and exegesis, and it is equally heartening that thinkers from the increasingly vital Majority World churches are able to speak with more clarity and frequency to the church in the West, whose size and morale are flagging.

But the developments have so far failed to penetrate the mainstream evangelical consciousness. Even if the majority of Christians now live outside of the West,

2013]; *Trinity and Revelation* [A Constructive Christian Theology for the Pluralistic World 2; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2014]) and Amos Yong’s *Renewing Christian Theology: Systematics for a Global Christianity* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2014).

⁹ See Tokunboh Adeyemo, ed., *Africa Bible Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2006). Production of similar volumes for South Asia and Latin America are in advanced stages. In addition, the Asia Bible Commentary series (ATA Publications) and Africa Bible Commentary Series (Hippo Books) offer accessible, English-language commentary on the biblical text from authors in their respective regions.

¹⁰ Priscilla Pope-Levison and John R. Levison, eds., *Return to Babel: Global Perspectives on the Bible* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1999); Walter Dietrich and Ulrich Luz, eds., *The Bible in a World Context: An Experiment in Contextual Hermeneutics* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002); E. Randolph Richards and Brandon J. O’Brien, *Misreading Scripture with Western Eyes: Removing Cultural Blinders to Better Understand the Bible* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2012); Craig S. Keener and M. Daniel Carroll R., eds., *Global Voices: Reading the Bible in the Majority World* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2013).

¹¹ The Majority World Theology Series has now produced its first volume: Gene L. Green, Stephen T. Pardue, and K. K. Yeo, eds., *Jesus Without Borders: Christology in the Majority World* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2014), with several more volumes in process.

¹² For the sake of clarity, it is crucial that the task of discerning various approaches to contextualization be distinguished from our task here, which is identifying diverse evangelical responses to world Christianity. Because of this, many fine distinctions available in the literature regarding the nature of good and bad contextualization will not be articulated here. For a helpful survey of evangelical perspectives on contextualization, see A. Scott Moreau, *Contextualization in World Missions: Mapping and Assessing Evangelical Models* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2012); Jackson Wu, “Contextualizing the One Gospel in Any Culture: A Model from the Biblical Text for a Global Context,” *Global Missiology* 3 (2013); Timoteo Gener and Stephen T. Pardue, “Global Theology: Where to From Here?” in *God at the Borders: Globalization, Migration, and Diaspora* (ed. Charles R. Ringma, Karen Hollenbeck-Wuest, and Athena O. Gorospe; Manila, Philippines: OMF Literature, 2015).

¹³ See Gene L. Green, “Introduction,” in *Global Theology in Evangelical Perspective* 9–18; Craig L. Blomberg, “We Contextualize More Than We Realize,” in *Local Theology for the Global Church: Principles for an Evangelical Approach to Contextualization* (ed. Matthew Cook et al.; Pasadena: William Carey Library, 2010) 37–55.

90% of evangelical theological and exegetical literature neither seeks to address explicitly the needs of that population, nor to tell North American audiences what they should make of this new reality. Of course, this is not in itself an indictment of the status quo. After all, the relatively prosperous economies of the West mean that readers there will for now have an outsized influence on most publications (though the growing economies of Africa, Asia, and Latin America should represent a key target for Christian publishers seeking to survive the 21st century).

Aside from this pragmatic reality, one may also reasonably wonder if the approaches to theology and biblical studies available at the present are actually fairly sufficient, even with new demographics. As one participant at a conference discussion recently voiced: “we don’t ask what the African perspective on gravity is, so why do we need to ask what the African perspective on Biblical theology is?”¹⁴ Indeed, given that theology is not (or at least should not be) a “majority-rules” enterprise, nor an exercise of merely serving special interest groups, it is not self-evident that shifts in the Christian population should precipitate changes in theological or interpretive approaches.

Moreover, one could certainly make the case that the expansion of evangelical churches around the world is due at least in part to those churches’ commitment to biblical seriousness over and against diversity-obsessed theological experiments. Many would note that the WCC denominations that first introduced the notions of contextualization and global theological innovation are not at the moment models for health, whether measured numerically or in terms of morale, and it is possible that their theological commitments along these lines are partially to blame. Proposals suggesting a shift in theological approaches in light of the current state of the church surely raise new questions about the normativity of doctrine and exegesis. After all, it is one thing to praise contextualization as an aid in evangelism in far-flung cultures, and another thing entirely to propose that theological textbooks the world over be adjusted to integrate these new instantiations of the faith.

III. A TEST CASE

It is here that we arrive at (arguably) the most significant reason for the relative paucity of mainstream evangelical reflection on the meaning of the worldwide church for theology and exegesis: even if efforts in the realm of “global theology” are of interest as unusual or exotic samples of the theological task, they are not viewed as a generative element in the theological process. Evangelical responses to contextualization and global theology have nearly all been designed to do one thing in particular: allow for theological innovations necessary for cross-cultural evangelism and discipleship without departure from cherished biblical teaching.

But this is a theologically anemic response to the phenomenon of world Christianity, amounting arguably to a refusal to respond to the Spirit’s vital work in the Majority World in the current moment. Before considering an alternative, how-

¹⁴ This comment is documented in Allen Yeh, *Contemporary Missiology in the Context of World Christianity* (Pasadena: William Carey Library, forthcoming).

ever, it is worth examining a prominent and recent example of mainstream engagement of this issue. In the process, we will note a number of misconceptions regarding theology and culture that contribute to the current state of things.

Consider a substantially revised chapter in the third edition of Millard Erickson's *Christian Theology* that seeks to take into account the changing demographics of global Christianity.¹⁵ Parenthetically, two things are worth noting at the outset. First, in addition to its wide use in North America, Erickson's book is a standard text in scores of seminaries in Latin America, Asia, and Africa. Second, it should be noted that Erickson's effort to tackle this issue is commendable; many other standard evangelical textbooks, even ones that have undergone various recent revisions, have basically nothing to say about the church outside the West and its impact on theology.¹⁶

Near the beginning, he explains that "the goal of contemporizing the Christian message is to retain the content and biblical doctrine while making the message more understandable today."¹⁷ Later in the same chapter, he states a standard evangelical instinct with regard to these issues when he avers that "the really crucial task of theology will be to identify the timeless truths, the essence of the doctrines, and to separate them from the temporal form in which they were expressed."¹⁸

Immediately, such phrasing seems problematic. For example, many have noted before that thinking this way inevitably favors current theological reflection and creates extra obstacles for more recent theological approaches, especially those of the younger parts of the church. Sometimes it is even implied that the "supra-cultural core" of the faith is actually equivalent to the already developed theology of the West.¹⁹ But even if such misapplication of the idea is avoided, there remains another problem: because all human thought is finite and culturally embedded in various ways, who can separate "the timeless truths, the essence of the doctrines" from temporal and cultural form? As Benno van den Toren notes, "the nature of language, of the cultural locatedness of all our theological reflection and of the development of theological thought" means that "it is impossible to produce a once-for-all adequate formulation of this gospel core."²⁰

Of course, rejecting the notion of a "supra-cultural core" need not require a leap into the ether of relativistic pluralism. A sufficiently theological approach of-

¹⁵ Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology* (3d ed.; Grand Rapids: Baker, 2013).

¹⁶ See, e.g., Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994); Michael Horton, *The Christian Faith: A Systematic Theology for Pilgrims on the Way* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011); Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (2d ed.; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996). Michael Bird's recent *Evangelical Theology: A Biblical and Systematic Introduction* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2013) bests many of its competitors by offering some reflection at points on developments in the Majority World church.

¹⁷ Erickson, *Christian Theology* 68.

¹⁸ *Ibid.* 80.

¹⁹ See Matthew Cook, "Contextual But Still Objective?," in *Local Theology for the Global Church* 85–86; Amos Yong, "Asian American Evangelical Theology," in *Global Theology in Evangelical Perspective* 204–6.

²⁰ Benno van den Toren, "Can We See the Naked Theological Truth?," in *Local Theology for the Global Church* 106. Note that this is true even if one is rightly convinced that culturally embedded statements about doctrine can access, by some movement of divine grace, the supra-cultural triune God.

fers a crucial alternative to the misleading notion of a “supra-cultural” kernel to the faith, since divine interactions with humans are always particular and local in execution, even if they bear universal implications. The messages of prophets and apostles, the incarnation, the teaching of Jesus; all of these bear the marks of the local, even if they are, of course, for all people across all times. For this reason, Kevin Vanhoozer has suggested that “theology is not supra- but transcultural.”²¹

While this may seem a pedestrian distinction, its implications are quite significant. The quest to abstract decultured ethical principles and doctrinal propositions from the biblical texts is fraught with theological peril. Consider, for example, the predilection of this approach to flatten various biblical genres; there is no way to do justice to the poetry of Ecclesiastes, for example, or the rich narrative of Genesis, when one is only on the hunt for principles that inform a particular theological or ethical effort.²² More worrisome still is the tendency to overlook the presence of cultural influence on the process of principlizing itself, not just on the second step of the process: the reclothing of the principles in contemporary garb.²³

On this topic, Erickson seems to misunderstand the approach advocated by Vanhoozer and others who have objected to “hard” principlizing (in which a set of propositions summing up the Bible, and taken to be without cultural influence, drive theological discourse), categorizing them as “transplanters” who “contend that no effort of contextualizing is necessary,” and believe that “one should simply declare the message as it is stated in biblical form, rather than attempting to restate it in contemporary or local categories.”²⁴ This is strange indeed, since both Vanhoozer and Clark (who is also criticized along these lines by Erickson) expend a great deal of ink—more ink than Erickson, it would seem—reflecting on what cultural forms theologians must adopt in order to suitably direct the process of faith seeking understanding.

Erickson advocates for a mode of contextualizing that he calls “translation,” (contrasted with an overly conservative “transplanting” approach and an overly ambitious “transforming” approach), in which the Christian message is reexpressed “in a more intelligible form” while leaving the content unaffected.²⁵ While Erickson explicitly deflects comparisons between his method and “separating the kernel from the husk,” this image is not far from the position he advocates, with one important caveat: Erickson makes it clear that he does not disdain the cultural, genre, and linguistic diversity of the biblical text.²⁶ And while Erickson at one point expresses concern about recognizing “that our understanding and interpretation are

²¹ Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine: A Canonical-Linguistic Approach to Christian Theology* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2005) 323.

²² David K. Clark, *To Know and Love God: Method for Theology* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2003) 96–97; Vanhoozer, *Drama Of Doctrine* 316.

²³ Clark, *To Know and Love God* 94–95; Vanhoozer, *Drama Of Doctrine* 316. Clark rightly notes that cultural forces not only influence the principles an interpreter might distill from biblical texts, but they also influence the very desire for principles, which is not necessarily a universal impulse.

²⁴ Erickson, *Christian Theology* 73.

²⁵ *Ibid.* 75.

²⁶ *Ibid.* 83.

influenced by our own circumstances in history,” he still speaks consistently of theologians isolating the “abiding essence” or “essential spiritual truth” of biblical texts or Christian doctrine, and then making a culturally appropriate application, implying that culture primarily affects the second but not the first step of translation.²⁷

Whether this is its intention or not, this is also the implication of the analogy he draws between his approach and a particular form of language learning—in which the teacher connects vocabulary to objects themselves rather than to a translation of the vocabulary word.²⁸ The implication is that when principlizing is done correctly, the intermediate step of describing an underlying truth is the equivalent of pointing to an object as opposed to writing the translated equivalent of a vocabulary word.²⁹ But this reflects an overly sanguine view of theological formulation, since the equivalent of pointing to the object itself in this case would be pointing to God himself, not to an abstracted theological statement made in a particular linguistic and cultural form. Moreover, as David Clark points out, even the assumption that a principle is the closest thing to God himself is reflective of a particular cultural orientation that privileges propositions over narrative.³⁰

Erickson’s expectation that there is a realm of non-cultured theological discourse is underscored in his response to objections to previous editions of his text. He strongly resists the notion that culture might contribute to the content, and not only the form of expression, of Christian doctrine.³¹ Erickson states at least three times that the notion that growing cultural perceptions may add to our understanding of the faith is incongruous with Christian tradition, and also seems incompatible with NT statements that assume a codified faith.³² He also argues that this notion is incompatible with historic Christian habits, citing instances in which the church challenged rather than adapted to its culture.³³

Before evaluating these specific claims, it is crucial to note what they signify: namely, an approach to theological discourse that requires a culture-free environment for the cultivation of theological principles, even if culture is allowed in the latter parts of the process—that of expressing theological claims in a comprehensible way.³⁴ It seems likely that precisely such views have until now prevented evangelicals from joining efforts to develop “contextual theology.”

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ See *ibid.*, 79–80.

²⁹ *Ibid.* 80.

³⁰ Clark, *To Know and Love God* 96.

³¹ Erickson, *Christian Theology* 84.

³² *Ibid.*

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ Let it be noted here that Erickson rightly states that every approach to theological reflection requires some form of principlizing (*ibid.* 87). The key difference he fails to note between his account of principlizing and other more nuanced approaches is that these other approaches explicitly embrace the cultured nature of principlizing, rather than presupposing a “middle step” between reading and translation in which culture allegedly has no sway (Clark, *To Know and Love God* 94). This is why Erickson is incorrect in at least two ways to suggest that his opponents are guilty of the same culture-bound problems as he (*Christian Theology* 85). First, alternative methods are distinct inasmuch as they acknowledge

This view is right in its intent (to avoid syncretism and cultural idolatry), but reflects a mistaken and insufficient view of the theologian's calling. First, Erickson's argument from NT texts is not persuasive. While texts such as Gal 1:6–9 and Jude 3 *do* forbid theological innovation that contradicts what has been received, they certainly *do not* seem to be saying what Erickson takes them to be: that the content of the faith is forever sealed. Consider: this would not account for any parts of the NT composed after Galatians. More importantly, in both cases the authors are focused on particular false teachings, and are forbidding innovations that are heterodox, not deepened understandings of particular Christian doctrines, as Erickson's opponents suggest.³⁵

Erickson's argument from church history is also unconvincing. While there were always those who sought to downplay the significance of culture for theological engagement (e.g. Tertullian), Andrew Walls has presented a trove of evidence that Christian savvy in appropriating cultural forms (from linguistic flexibility in translating Scripture to adaptive forms of liturgy) was a significant catalyst for theological insight.³⁶ Similarly, opponents of the "Hellenization thesis" have argued convincingly in recent years that the "Christianization of Hellenism," as Robert Louis Wilken has termed it,³⁷ allowed for significant gains for the church, as theologians adapted a potent philosophical system that allowed them to make crucial distinctions that were previously unavailable to them.

Consider, for instance, the Nicene Creed and the statement of Chalcedon, each of which unquestionably allowed for new developments in Christian doctrine. These statements simply would not have been possible without the tools made available by Greek language and intellectual culture (including concepts such as *homoousios*, *hypostasis*, *ousia*, etc.),³⁸ and this certainly seems to be a case in which "culture augments Scripture as a source of doctrine."³⁹ It would have been impossible for generations of theologians to reflect upon the precise senses in which Jesus is both divine and human, or upon the communication of his two natures, for exam-

the role of culture throughout the process of principlizing and moving "beyond the Bible," and second, because they do not suggest the same hard distinction between form and content regarding the influence of culture.

³⁵ Erickson's foil in this section is Stanley J. Grenz, *Revisioning Evangelical Theology: A Fresh Agenda for the 21st Century* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1993).

³⁶ For an excellent sampling of this argument and its implications for global theology, see Andrew F. Walls, "Old Athens and New Jerusalem: Some Signposts for Christian Scholarship in the Early History of Mission Studies," *IBMR* 21 (1997) 146–50; Andrew F. Walls, "The Rise of Global Theologies," in *Global Theology in Evangelical Perspective* 19–34.

³⁷ Robert Louis Wilken, *The Spirit of Early Christian Thought: Seeking the Face of God* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2003) xvi.

³⁸ For an excellent summary of the ways in which Christian theology gained from Greek intellectual culture, see Lewis Ayres, *Nicaea and Its Legacy: An Approach to Fourth-Century Trinitarian Theology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004).

³⁹ This is the view that Erickson explicitly denies, saying that such a position is "something different than the view that has ordinarily been called Christianity" (*Christian Theology* 85). This is a strong claim indeed, though Erickson is not alone in thinking this way. Michael Bird's discussion of culture, while more nuanced in some ways than Erickson's approach, concludes by defending the notion that culture is not a "a source of theology" (Bird, *Evangelical Theology* 76).

ple, without the linguistic and conceptual tools that Chalcedon and Nicaea made available through their appropriation of local language and culture. In this very real sense, the church gained theological insights that would otherwise not have been available.⁴⁰

Moreover, it is not merely the case that culture and language have historically helped to generate Christian doctrine; they continue to do so today. In the realm of systematic theology, for example, consider the increasingly full picture we gain of atonement and justification when we examine these concepts in relation to the cultural construct of honor and shame.⁴¹ In the realm of biblical exegesis, similar advantages are also available. Consider, for example, how understanding the Chinese notion of *dao* may help illuminate what the Gospel of John means when it refers to Jesus as the divine *logos*.⁴² Examples like these could be multiplied.⁴³ This need not be destabilizing to the faith, nor does it require an idolatrous and uncritical exaltation of culture, since the norm of Scripture (and the Triune God himself!) remains in authority. Instead, it means that by the power of the Spirit, new insights are often won when the Gospel crosses into new cultural territory.

IV. CATHOLICITY AS A THEOLOGICAL DESIDERATUM

It would be unwise to deny entirely the significance of the objections to “globalizing theology;” to be sure, the shadow of idolatry looms large here (as it always does in theological discourse). In addition, it has been too infrequently acknowledged among evangelicals that globalization is not a trend with uniformly benevolent results and connotations. Indeed, the palpable reality of its gifts—closer relationships between distant people, wider marketplace access for those outside of commercial centers, etc.—should not conceal the persistent economic disparities and moral dilemmas that it also permits and encourages.⁴⁴ Setting aside for a mo-

⁴⁰ Of course, I understand that the influence of Hellenistic philosophical and intellectual culture is controversial, and that some do not consider it a gain at all. While this article is not the place to defend against this notion, I point to two recent scholarly works that demonstrate the ways in which allegedly “Hellenized” aspects of the Christian doctrine of God (namely, divine impassibility and divine simplicity) in fact have efforts to remain Scripturally faithful at their core: Paul L. Gavrilyuk, *The Suffering of the Impassible God: The Dialectics of Patristic Thought* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004); Andrew Radde-Gallwitz, *Basil of Caesarea, Gregory of Nyssa, and the Transformation of Divine Simplicity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009).

⁴¹ See the analysis of justification in Jackson Wu, *Saving God's Face: A Chinese Contextualization of Salvation through Honor and Shame* (Evangelical Missiological Society Dissertation Series; Pasadena, CA: William Carey International University Press, 2012).

⁴² See the discussion in K. K. Yeo, “Biblical Christologies of the Global Church: Beyond Chalcedon? Towards a Fully-Christian and Fully-Cultural Theology,” in *Jesus Without Borders* 162–79.

⁴³ For specific examples of the generative nature of Christianity’s engagement with diverse cultures, see, e.g., Diane B. Stinton, *Jesus of Africa: Voices of Contemporary African Christology* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2004); Antonio Gonzalez, *The Gospel of Faith and Justice* (trans. Joseph Owens; Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2005); Simon Chan, *Grassroots Asian Theology: Thinking the Faith from the Ground Up* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2014).

⁴⁴ For a critical evaluation of globalization in relation to Christian theology, see Joerg Rieger, *Globalization and Theology* (Horizons in Theology; Nashville: Abingdon, 2010).

ment the degree to which globalization's legacy is hotly contested,⁴⁵ it should be noted that international corporations are not often exemplars of the kind of partnership and *koinonia* that should mark Christian theological interactions, often instead veering into the realm of exploitation. In short, globalization is not the ideal model for describing what proponents of "global" theology intend to support. In light of all of this, it seems prudent to consider whether there are resources internal to the faith to describe the kind of international and cross-cultural cooperation toward which we strive.

In particular, it is worth noting that the category of "catholicity" is much closer (and more amenable) than "globalization" to the approach adopted by the apostles in Acts 15 and Paul in Gal 3:28.⁴⁶ Perhaps most importantly, catholicity can gesture to the eschatological reality of Rev 5:9–10 in a way that globalization (or even the more innocent ideal of "diversity") cannot.⁴⁷ To emphasize the church's catholicity in this context is at once to ground proposals for a global perspective in theology and exegesis in something deeper than contemporary fads and business trends, and also to avoid the fallacy of succumbing to a democratic view of the theological enterprise.⁴⁸

Moreover, it is not often enough noted that catholicity should prompt not only attentiveness to diverse contemporary voices, but also to historical ones, since it directs us to recall that the church is a body spread over both space *and* time. These two realities together make for rich theological and interpretive interactions, and the mutual illumination offered by church history and contemporary studies of world Christianity is precisely what Andrew Walls and Kwame Bediako have highlighted as the chief benefit to the contemporary church.⁴⁹ For example, Christians who study the challenges and benefits that early Christian communities faced when applying certain technical language from Hellenistic culture to Jesus will have a better sense of the liabilities and benefits of certain linguistic and theological decisions they face in their own cultures, whether western or not.

This excursus is not simply a matter of theological nit-picking. Perhaps inadvertently, evangelicals have assumed a view of the theological task that neuters the possibility of catholic theology. If we are convinced that the task of theology is simply to take a decultured and timeless set of data (the "content of the faith") and make it understandable, we miss a theological opportunity that is more strategic now than ever: namely, the chance to understand the fullness of God better in light of our own culture and that of our global neighbors. The marvelously diverse set of reactions of Christian thinkers from around the world to Scripture and the gospel

⁴⁵ Consider, for example, growing movements to eat and buy local products, and the frequent protests that accompany the G-20 meetings every year.

⁴⁶ Gener and Pardue, "Global Theology."

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ For thoughtful elaboration of the role of catholicity in theology, see Vanhoozer, *Drama of Doctrine* 27–30.

⁴⁹ Bediako, *Theology and Identity: The Impact of Culture on Second Century Christian Thought and Modern Africa* (Oxford: Regnum, 1992); Andrew F. Walls, *The Missionary Movement in Christian History: Studies in the Transmission of Faith* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1996); Walls, "Rise of Global Theologies."

message are nothing less than an increasingly full picture of the plenitude of truth present in the infinite Godhead.

As we have emphasized throughout, committing to this vision of theology need not suggest radical pluralism or destabilization. The norms of Scripture and the guidance of the Spirit apply here as much as anywhere else, and there is no need to discard evangelical predilection for ensuring a kind of objectivity in theological and interpretive work. On the contrary, what may be needed is a fuller acknowledgement of the variety of theological goods that we seek when we theologize.

That is, instead of relying on a single, large, litmus-test question—does this match the supracultural core of the faith?—we will rightly look for a number of lesser desiderata, without which theological reflection will be judged lacking. The desiderata on which we have focused most of our time so far are: conformity to the fullness of the biblical witness and suitability for particular cultural contexts. We have now added that in the contemporary environment, in which we have increasing opportunities to interact with Christians from a variety of cultures and tongues, catholicity is a key theological desideratum.⁵⁰ That is, while theological discourse may do without it, it can certainly be improved by inclusion of the voices of biblically-informed, prudent interpreters and theologians from around the world. This is precisely the experiment now being carried out in the ETS and IBR groups dedicated to “Scripture and Theology in Global Context.”

V. TOWARD A CATHOLIC UNDERSTANDING OF PROVIDENCE

While I have sought to resolve some of the most basic questions about how theology might take a catholic shape while retaining an evangelical spirit, plenty of debates remain unresolved. For example, there are diverse perspectives regarding how controlling certain key descriptions of the faith—such as the Nicene Creed and the statement of Chalcedon—must be for contemporary theological discourse, especially outside of the West. Moreover, I have not provided, as some might wish, a list of criteria that we might use to assess novel theological developments that arise in conversation with culture. Those are tasks certainly worthy of reflection in other contexts.

What I hope I have shown is that evangelicals should not only support contextualization—the idea of translating the truths of the faith with local concepts and language—but should also lead the way toward properly catholic theology, which presses into service the material theological gains made when Christianity crosses cultures. For the most part, attending to catholicity will result in fine-tuning our understanding of various doctrines, though it may occasionally lead to the kind of radical revision of our doctrinal commitments that occurred during the Protestant Reformation. In addition to defending catholicity, I have argued that a prerequisite for this process will be the rejection of an approach to the theological

⁵⁰ Of course, this list would need to include many other characteristics; I focus only on the three relevant here.

enterprise that assumes we can make theological claims without mingling with culture, and that an explicitly wider perspective on the kinds of goods we seek in theological discourse will help ensure the stability of our approach.

At this point, I wish to sketch in the briefest terms an example of what catholic evangelical theology might contribute to the doctrine of providence in particular. For some time, it has been evident that the conception of providence held by many North American evangelicals is problematic in various ways. For example, sociologists Christian Smith and Melinda Lundquist Denton have noted the profoundly anemic views of divine interaction with the world among American evangelical youth,⁵¹ and Hans Boersma and a chorus of theologians have recently decried the ways in which modernity has “desacramentalized” Christian views of reality, leaving evangelicals with an insufficiently theological perception of the world.⁵² From a somewhat different standpoint, John Webster has argued that modern theology has left the doctrine of providence in crisis, inasmuch as the classical commitments associated with the doctrine are today considered remarkably unlikely, and even incompatible with certain scientifically verifiable realities.⁵³ Finally, Kathryn Tanner has recently sought to bring premodern resources to bear on this problem, seeking to show that a classical view of *concursum*—the notion that divine and human activities are not competitive with one another—can help deliver a view of providence capable of upholding serious Christian views while also taking into account developments in modern science.⁵⁴

All of this should be taken as good news for evangelicals, since these moves help enliven a doctrine that has often been deadened by unproductive discussions of the distinctions between Arminian and Calvinist perspectives. But there are also catholic reasons to be optimistic about the development of a more adequate doctrine of providence. This is the case because in many ways, this is one locus of Christian doctrine in which there is an increasing convergence between the needs of the church in North America and the strengths of the church in the Majority World.

In many pockets of the church in its centers of renewal, the modern tendency to view the world as a mechanistic venture in which God intervenes only sparingly is uncommon, and interactions with the created order that Western Christians often take to be strictly in the realm of science (healing and disease, for example, or weather patterns) are taken by many in the Majority World to be areas of divine action. This is, of course, not to say that Majority World Christians are unaware of or unconcerned about scientific developments in these areas—many are in fact at

⁵¹ *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005). Smith and Denton argue that many Christian youth basically subscribe to a modified form of deism, in which God’s actions in the world are primarily designed to reward niceness and to help make things feel better.

⁵² Hans Boersma, *Heavenly Participation: The Weaving of a Sacramental Tapestry* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011).

⁵³ John B. Webster, “Providence,” in *Mapping Modern Theology: A Thematic and Historical Introduction* (ed. Kelly M. Kapic and Bruce McCormack; Grand Rapids: Baker, 2012) 203–26.

⁵⁴ Kathryn Tanner, *The Working of the Spirit* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010) 274–301.

the forefront of such scientific work—but it is to say that the incompatibility of scientific and providential explanations of the world are not everywhere presumed.⁵⁵

A prudent and catholic approach to providence, therefore, should recognize the points of convergence between the calls for re-envisioning providence from Tanner, Boersma, and others in the West, and the tendency among Majority World Christians (and Pentecostal Christians in particular) to refuse the either/or of divine versus creaturely agency. At the same time, acknowledging an appropriate commitment to historic Christian commitments, and recognizing the potential dangers of uncritical providentialism,⁵⁶ a prudent approach would also facilitate the *ressourcement* of historic Christian elaborations of *concursus*, which include resources designed to safeguard against such excesses. Such an approach thus promises not only to revitalize an area of theology that has been stripped of its significance in the West, but also to strengthen and augment the doctrine as it exists in the worldwide centers of the church's renewal.

Such an approach would probably require treading in territory that is generally regarded today under the label of superstition or anti-intellectualism. It may confess, for example, that illness is not solely reducible to viruses and bacteria (at least no more than romantic love is reducible to the firing of neurotransmitters in the brain) and may be bold enough to suggest that spiritual forces, including the hand of the Lord, are often at work in such matters. While these risks may make us balk, it is worthy of note that such positions are far closer to those of our theological forbears than the practical naturalism with which many of us may feel comfortable. In the end, it may turn out that such an outlook on providence is not supported by reasoned reflection on Scripture and God's works, and we must stand ready for such a result; catholicity does not require submission to every trend in the burgeoning worldwide church. But I suspect that if such an approach to divine providence were carried out at length—properly delimited through attention to the details of Christian doctrine as taught in Scripture and the great tradition—it would prove far more capable of answering the challenges of modernity than the approaches currently at our disposal.

Projects like these are neither conceptually simple nor easily executed. Even in today's shrinking world, the geographic and cultural distance between Louisville and Manila often remains prohibitive. The skills necessary for executing such projects involve not only an understanding of Scripture and the great tradition, but also of multiple cultures (and perhaps languages). These skills often do not dwell in the same person, which may mean that cooperative efforts will be required in many cases. But if evangelicals are willing to do more than pay lip service to the blessing of the worldwide expansion of the church in the past century, they will reap the

⁵⁵ Tennent, *Theology in the Context of World Christianity* 177–79.

⁵⁶ See Timoteo D. Gener, "Fatalism," in *Global Dictionary of Theology* 315–17.

benefits of deepened acquaintance with the being and acts of the God they seek to know.⁵⁷

⁵⁷ I wish to thank Singapore Bible College for inviting the first iteration of this essay and to its faculty for offering helpful initial feedback. In addition, I am grateful to the following individuals for their assistance and feedback on previous versions of this essay: Hank Voss, Uche Anizor, Bob Lay, Charlie Trimm, Jeremy Treat, Dan Treier, and Kevin Vanhoozer. Of course, the paper represents my views and not theirs, and its flaws are my own.