

Demographics, Power and the Gospel in the 21st Century

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It is a very great honor and privilege to be invited to be with you. I have long had the greatest admiration for the work which Wycliffe and its allied organizations are doing and many friends in Wycliffe in various parts of the world. As someone concerned for the well being of Christian theology, I think there is no greater theological issue at the moment than the one will which you are concerned: Mother tongue Christian thinking is, for reasons that I hope we can discuss in the coming session, one of the crucial things for the future of the Christian faith.

The Maori people of New Zealand, and I think this is true of other Polynesian peoples, speak of the future as being behind us. We cannot see it. The past is what is in front of us. We can see that stretched out before us, the most recent plainly, the more distant shading away to the horizon.

As we approach a topic such as the one assigned to me it's wise to remember that the future is behind us. Despite a title that speaks of the gospel in the 21st Century, I cannot say what that Century will hold for the Christian faith or say what will befall the Church of Christ. What we can do is to look at the past in front of us and see what it suggests of the way that we have come and perhaps read in outline, as on a sketch map, the place to which we have been brought now. That may give us some hints of what we can expect in the days to come. That might be the reason why so much of the Bible consists of history in one form or another. We are to use the past spread out before us to show us where we are, as we enter a future that is still behind us.

I'd like to attempt some generalizations this morning about Christian history that may tell us something about what we might call a Christian demographics, and this may give us some hints for locating ourselves for the work of the gospel at the point of Christian history to which we have now come.

The first generalization is about the nature of Christian expansion. Christian expansion is not progressive; it is serial. Perhaps we can understand this best by comparing the histories of Christianity and Islam. Both faiths call the whole world to allegiance. Each has succeeded in establishing itself among peoples among diverse culture and diverse geographical locations. But in the light of comparative history, Islam has, so far at least, been much more successful than Christianity in maintaining that allegiance over time. Lands that have become Muslim have, generally speaking (there are exceptions), remained Muslim. Arabia now seems so utterly, axiomatically Muslim that it's hard to remember, isn't it, that the Yemen was once a Christian kingdom.

Contrast Jerusalem, which cannot even claim an unbroken Christian history, let alone a dominant one. Jerusalem, the mother church of us all, is not the Christian Mecca. Or consider Egypt or Syria or Tunisia - these were once the showcase churches, the churches that led the Christian world, adorned by the greatest theologians and the profoundest scholars, and sanctified by the blood of the Martyrs. They were churches that had seen the collapse of paganism around them and the triumphs of Christ throughout their surrounding areas.

Or think of the days, and few Christians nowadays even realize that those days happened, when the Christian faith was the profession of the whole Euphrates valley and most of the people who live in what is now Iraq, professed that faith; when new churches were springing up in Iran and across Central Asia, even in the countries we now call Afghanistan and Tajikistan.

Or consider my own country, with its towns where John Knox and John Wesley once preached but are now full of churches that nobody needs and that get turned into fellowship doors or restaurants or even nightclubs. In my own city of Aberdeen we have a former church that now rejoices as a nightclub under the name “The Ministry of Sin.”

In each of these cases, a place that had been a leading center of Christian faith, an area where the Christian faith was dominant, ceased to hold that position. For whatever reason, and there are many different reasons in the different cases, the light was dimmed, sometimes indeed, extinguished. As the Book of Revelation puts it, the candlestick was taken out of its place. But in none of these cases did the dimming or withering of Christian witness in one of its major centers lead to the end of Christian witness in the world. The very reverse. By the time the Jerusalem church was scattered to the wind, as happened within the very first Christian century, there were churches of Greek ex-pagan Christians right across this Mediterranean area and beyond it. As the churches in Iraq declined, the churches in Iran increased. As the great Christian centers of Egypt, and Syria and North Africa passed under Muslim rule, the Barbarians of northern and western Europe, from whom people like myself are descended, were gradually coming to appropriate the Christian faith. Withering at the center went along with blossoming at or beyond the margins of the Christian faith.

Christian advance is not steady inevitable progress. Advance is often followed by recession. The spread of the gospel does not produce permanent gains that can be plotted on a map: “We have done that.” Christianity has vulnerability at its very heart, fragility in its expression. It’s perhaps the vulnerability of the Cross and the fragility of the earthen vessel.

Islamic expansion often is progressive; it moves steadily outwards from its cosmic center, and Mecca continues to have that cosmic significance that no place on earth can have for Christians (even our Jerusalem is the new Jerusalem, not the old one, and it comes down ready-made out of heaven at the last time)

Christian progress is serial, rooted first in one place, then in another. Christianity has no equivalent of Mecca, no single permanent center. Christian communities often wither in their heartlands, their areas of seeming strength, and then flower anew at or beyond the periphery. No one country, no one culture, owns the Christian faith. There’s no permanently Christian country, no one form of Christian civilization, no single Christian culture. At different periods, different areas of the world have taken leadership in the Christian mission and then the baton has passed on to others.

This is one thing we see as we look at the whole Christian past in front of us. But let’s look a little more closely at the part right in front of us, the recent past, the last hundred years or so. The 20th Century has probably been the most remarkable Century of church history since the first. Certainly the shape of the Church demographically changed more completely, more radically, during the 20th Century than it did in any previous century.

Two things happened simultaneously. One was the greatest recession that the Christian faith has known since the rise of Islam, and that recession was centered in Europe and has begun to spill into North America. The second was a huge accession to the Christian faith, again probably the largest that has ever been known. There were only about ten million professing Christians in the whole of the African continent when the 20th Century began. No one knows how many there are now, but an educated guess would be in the region of 350 million – that in the course of a century. Korea had a tiny, tiny church when the century began. Now it sends its missionaries all over the world, takes over where Western missions left off, and enters places where Western missions never went.

We’ve heard this morning already of events in northeast India, of Christian states where, what is it? Over 90% of the population profess the Christian faith in Mizoram in a state that sends out missionaries all over India. But a hundred years ago that church hardly

existed. Fifty years ago Nepal was still a closed land and certainly a century past, mission work amongst the tribal people of the Indo-Burma borderland was in its infancy. Now, that picture that we have from northeast India is part of a whole chain of new Asian Christian populations stretching from the Himalayas through the Arakan right through the Southeast Asian peninsula. The new Christian in Nepal, the movement in northeast India, over the border in southwest China, the peoples in Myanmar and Thailand and beyond, a whole Christian constituency that no one has thought of very much because it covers so many countries and in each Christians are a minority and not a small minority; but see that whole chain of new churches that have come into being in the course of the 20th Century!

Over the past century Christian advance and Christian recession have gone on simultaneously, recession in the West, advance in Africa, Asia and Latin America; withering at the center, blossoming at the edges. The baton is passing to the Christians of Asia and Africa and the Americas, and let me add the Pacific (you have a most remarkably universal representation here); but it's in these areas, these southern continents, if we may so call them, where more and more every year responsibility now lies for Christian mission in the world.

Christian advance in the world is serial and, in the providence of God, it is the Christians of Africa and Asia and Latin America and the Pacific that are next in the series. We who belong to the West are no longer the leaders, the initiators, the norm setters. We are now to learn to be the helpers, the assistants, and the facilitators. The great event, the great surprise for Christianity over the past hundred years has been this shift in the center of gravity of the Church. This radical change in its demographic and cultural composition, by all present indications appears to be continuing. It means that the Christians of the southern continent are now the representative Christians, the people by whom the quality of the 21st and 22nd Century Christianity will be judged, the people who will set the norms, the standard Christians. And the quality of 21st Century Christianity will depend on them.

A hundred years ago European and American mission leaders took responsibility for re-Christian mission in the world. My office in Edinburgh is right next door to the place where the World Missionary Conference met in 1910. There were a few distinguished Asian Christian leaders at that conference. There wasn't a single African presence, by the way. But the proceedings were shaped by the people of Europe and America. That will be less and less the situation in the future. We must consider in a moment the question of power, but whatever may be true in the economic and military spheres, what happens in the Christian sphere will increasingly depend on the Christians of Asia, Africa and Central and Southern America, and the Pacific. The demographic fact we now have to live with and work with and think around is that we begin the 21st Century with an increasingly post-Christian West and an increasingly post-Western Christianity.

At the World Missionary Conference in Edinburgh in 1910, of which I've spoken, one of the Indian delegates was a young, still not very experienced Anglican minister, V. S. Azariah. He was asked to speak at a fringe meeting on cooperation between missionaries and nationals in what were then called the younger churches. He analyzed some of the (particularly missionary) attitudes that sometimes made relations difficult. Then he uttered the words, which have become perhaps the most famous of all the many thousands of words that were uttered at Edinburgh. "Through all the ages to come," he said, "the Indian church will rise up in gratitude to attest the heroism and self-denying labors of the missionary body. You have given your goods to feed the poor; you have given your bodies to be burned. We also ask for love. Give us friends." And that was the last word of the speech. It was a bombshell. Missions were busy planning the evangelization of the world, but the first desire of the so-called infant churches was not for leadership, not for more workers, not for more funds, but for friendship. Friendship implies equality and mutual respect. A friend is someone you want to spend your spare time with.

These younger churches were not, even at that time, prattling infants, and over the years since Edinburgh 1910, many of those churches have been through the fires. What church in history has gone through what the church in China has done over the last 50 years and emerged as it has done? What churches in history have had routinely to cope with such persistent horrors of devastation, war, displacement, and genocide, as have those of central Africa and the Sudan? Which churches have ever been required more urgently to give moral leadership to their nation than those of South Africa, or to speak for the poor and oppressed and the needy than those of Latin America? Or have ever more thoroughly devoted themselves to the spread of the Christian gospel than those of Korea? It is the churches of the non-Western world that now bring to the world the accumulated experience of God's salvation.

In what parts of the world has God been preparing his people by suffering and desolation? In what parts of the world does the cry go up most urgently for God to deliver His people from saints beneath the altar?

A second proposition is that Christianity lives by crossing cultural frontiers. The first believers in Jesus were all of them Jews by race. They saw in Jesus their Scriptures being fulfilled. It gave new meaning and insight to everything that they'd always known. They didn't have to change their religion. Because of Jesus the Messiah, they loved the Law; they loved the temple with its liturgy and its sacrifices, far more than they'd ever done before. Everything about Jesus made sense in Jewish terms, and for a long time the leaders were very anxious that all other Jews should know about Jesus, but rarely mentioned Him to people who were not Jews, and then only in special circumstances.

All that changed when described in the 11th chapter of Acts, a group of believers who had been forced to flee Jerusalem (as we heard just now) after the Stephen affair, made their way to Antioch and began to talk about Jesus to their Greek pagan neighbors. It was so unusual that the apostles sent an envoy, an ambassador Barnabas, to inspect what had happened. He was delighted in that church at Antioch, where Jews and Gentiles mixed and ate together, sent its own missionaries to the Greek world, Jewish and Gentile missionaries to the Jewish and Gentile Greek world. When Paul came back from one of these missionary journeys, the Jerusalem church was glad to hear of the success of his work, but if we read Acts 22 carefully, we can see that most people in Jerusalem still believed that the really significant work of the church lay right there at home. "You see, brother, how many thousands of the Jews there are who have believed and all of them zealous for the Law." In other words, it's great to hear these stories from the mission field, but the real work is what's going on here. This is the center. Yet, the Jerusalem church did not, in fact, have much time left. A generation, and the Roman war had broken out and that church had scattered and with the fall of the Jewish state in AD70, it lost its natural habitat. Christianity would have been nothing more than a minor Jewish sect but for one thing. It had crossed a cultural boundary into the Greek world, and when that earliest church, the church of the apostles, the church that had known the ministry of Jesus Himself, when that church was eclipsed, a new one, Greek speaking, Gentile, was already in place.

Similar things have happened several times since. Christianity became characteristic of the Hellenistic world; it spread to a dominant place in the civilization of the Roman Empire with its developed literature and its technology. But there came a time when that church, too, was eclipsed. What enabled the faith to survive and to grow was the fact that it had crossed another cultural boundary. It had entered the world that the Romans feared so, as destroying their civilization, the people that they called Barbarians, the barbaroi, the people whose language is all 'bar-bar', who don't speak real languages. Once again, Christianity had survived a major crisis because it had been transmitted to a people of a different language, different culture, different way of life.

We could go on and on over the centuries, but the past century has seen that story repeated. When the 20th Century began, Christianity was very much the religion of the West. More than 80% of those who professed and called themselves Christians lived in Europe or North America. A century later, Christianity in Europe is in deep decline, and North America I suspect showing many of the signs that Europe did when its own, soon rapidly accelerated, decline from Christianity began. But in the world as a whole, the Christian faith is not in decline and the reason is that, in the past century and in the time before that, by means especially (though not exclusively) of the missionary movement of which so many of us are being privileged to be a part, the gospel crossed cultural frontiers in Africa and Asia. A century ago, the number of Christians in the non-Western world looked quite small. Now they are the majority, and every year there are fewer Christians in the West and more in the rest of the world.

Christianity lives by crossing the boundaries of language and culture. Without this process it can wither and die. So, in the coming century, the new representative Christians of Asia and Africa and Latin America and the Pacific will be required, I'm sure, to cross cultural boundaries, possibly even western cultural boundaries, in order to share their faith.

The third proposition is that crossing cultural frontiers constantly brings Christ into contact with new areas of human thought and experience. All of these, converted, become part of the functioning body of Christ. The full stature of Christ depends on all of them together. We see how the earliest church was entirely Jewish in race and in culture in its ways of thought. It developed a thoroughly Jewish way of being Christian, a Jewish-Christian lifestyle. When those Greeks in Antioch were converted, many believers must have taken it for granted that they would become Jewish proselytes, accept circumcision and keep the Torah. That had always happened when Gentiles came to recognize the God of Israel. There was, in fact, only one style of Christian life that anyone knew, and it was a Jewish style. The Lord, Himself, had lived that way and had said that not a jot or tittle would pass from the law by His agency. All the Apostles continued to this day to live by it. But when that great council of Jerusalem described in Acts 15 came to consider the matter, the leaders of the church agreed that circumcision and Torah were not required for Gentile believers. Hellenistic believers would now have to find a Hellenistic way of being Christian under the guidance of the Holy Spirit because they had to live in Hellenistic society and they would have to change Hellenistic family and social life, but change it organically, from the inside. The Hellenistic way of being Christian would be different from the Jewish way of being Christian, and yet the two belonged with each other. One was not superior to the other, one was not a soft option for benighted heathen, the other was not a legalistic bondage for people who didn't live in cosmopolitan civilization. These were different segments of social reality, each being turned towards Christ, converted to Him and belonging together in the functioning body of Christ. That's what the Epistle to the Ephesians is about, celebrating this extraordinary fact not just of the two mutually hostile races being joined together but of two cultures brought together to eat and work together within the Body of Christ.

When the Epistle to the Ephesians was written, there were only two major cultures in the Christian church, two Christian lifestyles, the Jewish and the Hellenistic. How many are there now? One of the great tasks of Christian mission in the coming century will be to allow these different Christian lifestyles to grow but to interact because (I love this representation in the artwork behind me and around the wall), yes, all these belong together in the body of Christ.

Distinct segments of social reality, because we never meet humanity generalized. Christ was not humanity generalized. Christ was human in a very specific cultural situation, and as He's received by faith in other settings, He's again translated into specific segments of social

reality. Yet all this is the Body of Christ, and the Body of Christ is not complete, the full stature of Christ is not reached until all these cultures and sub-cultures, which your different cultures represent, are brought together in Heaven. We have reached an Ephesian moment such as the Church has never seen since that First Century.

The Ephesian situation arose because of the vital difference between converts and proselytes. Before the time of Christ the Jews had designed ways of welcoming Gentiles who recognized the God of Israel. Proselytes were circumcised, baptized and entered into the life of Israel by seeking to obey the Torah. That great council as we've seen decided that Gentile believers in Jesus, although they were ex-pagans without the lifelong training in doctrine and morality that Jews had, should not keep the Torah, should find a lifestyle of their own within Hellenistic society under the guidance of the Spirit. They were not proselytes, they were converts. This distinction between convert and proselyte is of fundamental importance. If the first Gentile believers had become proselytes, living exactly the style of life of those who brought them to Christ, they might have become very devout believers but they would have had virtually no impact on their society. They would have effectively been taken out of that society. It was their task as converts to convert their society, convert it in the sense that they had to learn to keep turning their ways of thinking and doing things (these, of course, were Greek ways of thinking and doing things) towards Christ, opening them up to His influence.

I wish we had time to explore this. Let me, in the moments that are left to me, suggest two aspects of the new world order that arises out of this post-Christian West and post-Western Christianity:

One of them is economic. I can summarize this by pointing to the United Nations report on population published last year. On this count the world's population is increasing by 1.2%, 77 million people each year, half that increase coming from six countries: India, China, Pakistan, Nigeria, Bangladesh, Indonesia. The increase in population growth will be concentrated in the countries that are least able to support it. By 2050, Africa, it is projected, will have three times the population of Europe, and this despite the anticipated deaths of three hundred million Africans from AIDS by that time. On the other hand, the population of Europe and most other developed countries is projected to fall: Germany and Japan by 14%, Italy by 25%, Russia and Ukraine perhaps as much as 40%. This will require migration to maintain economic levels in the developed world and the prime target for immigration will be the US, which with a million new immigrants per year will be one of the few developed countries to increase its population perhaps to 400 million, but entirely as a result of immigration.

So, the Ephesian moment brings us a Church more culturally diverse than it's ever been before, nearer potentially to that full stature of Christ that belongs to the summing up of all of humanity. But it also announces a Church of the poor. Christianity will be mainly the religion of rather poor and very poor people with few gifts to bring except the gospel itself. And the heartlands of the Church will include some of the poorest countries on earth. A developed world in which Christians become less and less important and influential will seek to protect its position against the rest.

Suddenly, the main political issue across Western Europe has become the incoming peoples from Eastern Europe and beyond. As the bombs have rained down on Afghanistan, so Afghans have moved to the west. New political parties have arisen across Western Europe, with opposition to letting immigrants in as their platform. They have frightened the old parties by their electoral success, so the old parties begin to use the same language. Western Christians are going to be faced with some enormous Christian choices.

The Ephesian question at the Ephesian moment is whether or not the Church in all its diversity will be able to demonstrate its unity by the interactive participation of all its culture-specific segment, what is expected in a functioning body. In other words, will the body of

Christ be realized or fractured? And there will be both economic and, I think, theological consequences from the answer.

May I have a couple of minutes for theology? Please allow an elderly Western academic to speak from his heart. I think the theological enterprise of the 21st Century is similar in scope and extent to that of Christians in the Greek world in the 2nd and 3rd Century and beyond. This is the time when the foundations of the Christian theology were being laid using the materials available in the Hellenistic world. We can expect to see new building on those foundations, using the materials that are to hand away in all the various peoples which you represent or where you have been facilitating the preaching of the gospel.

Theology is made out of local materials applied to the Bible, because the purpose of theology is to make or to clarify Christian decision. Christian theology is thinking in a Christian way and is done by all sorts of people who don't know that they are being theologians. It's about choice, about thinking in a Christian way. But the need to do this arises from the specific conditions in which life is lived. So the theological agenda is culturally induced. Culture sets the tasks for theology. As the gospel crosses new cultural frontiers, creative Christian theology goes on. The theological task is never complete. The theological workshop is always open and it becomes more active every time we cross a cultural frontier.

And the materials for Christian theology are also culturally conditioned. On the one hand, there's the biblical material; but this material has to be brought to bear on the situations which have caused the need for Christian choice. This means using the mental materials of the time and the place where the choice has to be made. These materials have to be converted, turned towards Christ to make this possible, because this is not what they originally were designed for. The doctrines of the Trinity and the Incarnation, which the church at large confesses in its creeds now, were constructed from the materials of middle period Platonism converted to handle the material of the Christian tradition.

Let's remember that conversion is about turning things to Christ. It's more about direction than about content. It's not a matter of substituting something new for something old or adding something new to something old; it's a matter of turning what is already there towards Christ.

But what brought the doctrines of the Trinity and the Incarnation, in the formulations that we know, into being? They came from a need to think in a Christian way about Christ across a cultural frontier. The need arose because the gospel had crossed from the Judaic to the Greek world. The first believers were Jews who saw Jesus in terms of Jewish identity, Jewish history, and Jewish destiny. When they came to faith in Jesus and came to share their faith in Jesus with Greek-speaking Gentile people who'd been pagans, they had a difficulty. The word that meant most to them personally was Messiah. The whole of the Old Testament was summed up in that word. But the word didn't mean much to Greeks and needed an explanation even if you translated it into Greek. A term had to be used that would mean something to Greek-speaking pagans, and they chose the word *Kyrios*, Lord, that those pagan people used for their cult divinities. To many, that must have seemed an impoverishment, even a distortion. Wasn't it dangerous to use language that belonged to heathen cults? Shouldn't Gentile converts learn about the Messiah as Israel's national Savior? In fact, the use of the term was enriching. It made people think about Christ in a different way because they now thought of Him in indigenous categories.

It also raised awkward questions that had not been raised before. For instance, what was the relationship between the Messiah and the One God? Jewish believers could use a phrase like "Jesus is at the right hand of God." And everybody knew what that meant. It was enough to get Stephen lynched! But this wasn't enough for Greeks. Did it mean that God had a right hand? Even if you got over that anthropomorphism, it didn't deal with what a Greek needed

to know: the relationship of God to Messiah in terms of being, of essence. There was no escape from the language of *ousia* and *hypostasis*. All that long agonizing debate (are they the same *ousia* [essence], different *ousiai*, similar *ousiai*) was needed to explain what Christians really meant about Christ. Of course, the Bible was central to the debate, but there was no single text that would clearly settle the matter. It was necessary to explore the sense of the Scriptures using the indigenous vocabulary, the indigenous methods of debate, the indigenous patterns of thought.

It was a risky business. There's no such thing as safe theology. Theology is an act of adoration fraught with a risk of blasphemy, but an act of adoration, of worship, nevertheless. Orthodoxy is giving the right glory to God. A risky business. People came up out of that risky but rewarding process with a more thorough understanding of Christ as the eternal Son of God, begotten of His Father before all worlds, than they could ever have reached solely by using the Jewish category of Messiah. And this enriched knowledge came because people asked Greek questions, using Greek materials in language and thought, asking the questions that came from crossing that cultural frontier.

Translation did not destroy the old tradition either. The old category of Messiah meant just as much as it did before. There was no need to give anything up. And looking back, of course, one can see those discoveries about Christ were there in the Scriptures all the time. But it was possible to miss them, until they were translated into another language and another set of mental categories. Every time the gospel crosses a cultural frontier there's a new need for theological creativity. It was crossing the frontier from the Greek to the Barbarian world that brought the doctrine of the Atonement to the measure of understanding we now have of it, and so one could go on and on.

The process will be made increasingly necessary in this vast Ephesian world that we now have by the questions that come about Christ in the circumstances of all these diverse Christian peoples who are represented here.

As it stands at the moment, the Western Theological Academy represented in our universities and seminaries is simply not equipped to lead in the new world order that the demographics of the Holy Spirit has brought about. I don't have time to elaborate that. What I'm trying to say is that even in terms of theological creativity, more and more the responsibility will fall on the Christians making their Christian choices in mother tongue theological thinking in Africa, in Asia, in Latin America, in the Pacific islands.

The present situation of Christianity is like that I've described with the first frontier, the Greek world was crossed, only this time it's not the Mediterranean world or the Western world at all that's the scene of the interaction. The crucial activity is now the Christian interaction with the ancient cultures of Africa, Asia, the Americas, the Pacific. The quality of the Christianity of those areas and thus the quality of 21st Century Christianity as a whole will depend on the quality of that interaction. If the quality is good, we might see something like what appeared in the 3rd and 4th and 5th Centuries, a great creative development of Christian theology; new discoveries about Christ that Christians everywhere can share; mature discriminating standards of Christian living; peoples and groups responding to the gospel at a deep level of understanding and personality; a long-term Christ-shaped imprint on the thinking of Africa and Asia, a new stage in the church's growth towards the full stature of Christ.

If the quality is poor we shall see distortion, confusion, uncertainty, and almost certainly hypocrisy on a large scale. This is not simply a matter that affects the southern continents. We've seen that in the 21st Century Christianity is revealed as an increasingly non-Western religion. The principal theaters of Christian activity in this latest phase are in those southern continents and what happens there will determine what the 21st and 22nd centuries will be like. What happens in Europe and even, I think, in North America, will matter less

and less. The critical processes will take place where the representative Christians take on the development of theological thinking, ethical thinking, the Christian impact on society, the responsibility for the evangelization of the world. The primary responsibility for developing theological scholarship is going to lie in those communities. The point's worth stressing because it will probably be the only field of scholarship where this is the case. In scientific and medical and technological spheres leadership will remain with the West or in those areas of East Asia where East Asia can outstrip the West.

But in theology, authentic theological scholarship has to arise out of Christian mission and, therefore from those principal theaters of mission, making Christian decisions a critical situation; and it's in the southern continent where those decisions will be most crucial. Theology is a byproduct of cultural conversion. Will the demographic transformation of the Church great issues use for theology will be arriving from the interaction of biblical thinking with the ancient cultures of the south. We're at the threshold of an age that could prove as creative and enriching theologically as any since the similar interaction with Greek culture in the 2nd Century.

Conversion is the steady, relentless turning of all the mental and moral processes towards Christ; turning what is already there; turning to Christ the elements of the pre-conversion setting. Origen puts it beautifully with a little touch of his own special sort of exegesis: "How is it," he asks, "that the Israelites were able to make the cherubim and the gold ornaments of the tabernacle while they were in the wilderness? The answer was, of course, that they had previously spoiled the Egyptians. The cherubim and vessels for the tabernacle were made from Egyptian gold and the tabernacle curtains of Egyptian cloth." "It is the business of Christian people," he goes on, "to take the things that are misused in the heathen world and to fashion from them the things for the worship and glorification of God."

The serial nature of Christian expansion has taken its heartlands away from the West and into the southern continents. The translation of the faith into new cultural contexts, and the new questions that process gives life to will expand and enrich, if we will allow it, our understandings of Christ. Christians everywhere, including those who live in the mammon-worshipping culture of the West, the last great non-Christian culture to arise, are called to the relentless turning of their mental and moral processes towards Christ. In the process and in the fellowship of the body of Christ, we may notice that the tabernacle is now adorned with African gold and its curtains are hung with cloth from Asia and the Pacific and from Central and South America.