Christian Mission in an Era of Religious Pluralism
- A Discussion Paper based on an Evangelical View of Authority and Revelation

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Introduction

Religious pluralism in contemporary society requires that Christians rethink why and how we “do mission” in this era of unprecedented global interconnectedness. In particular, Christians today are compelled to deeply reflect on long-held doctrines that maintain the uniqueness and salvific universality of Jesus Christ. Both outside of and within Christian circles, there are those who ask, “By what authority do you do mission?” In common parlance, the question might be stated, “What makes you think your/our [Christian] religion is any better than anyone else’s?”

Evangelical Christians such as this author might respond to these questions by saying, “It is by God’s authority given by Jesus Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit that we share the good news of what God has done for us.” According to the Lausanne Covenant, a document produced by Evangelical representatives from more than 150 nations participating in the 1974 International Congress on World Evangelization, our task is to “spread the good news that Jesus Christ died for our sins and was raised from the dead according to the Scriptures, and that as the reigning Lord he now offers the forgiveness of sins and the liberating gifts of the Spirit to all who repent and believe.” Thus, we do not preach the religion of Christianity; rather we testify to the person of Jesus Christ, God’s fullest self-revelation, and invite others to experience the forgiveness, freedom, and wholeness of life intended for us by God.

A reasonable rebuttal to this Evangelical perspective is to point out that there are many faith traditions in the world that witness to divine revelation. If Christians acknowledge even partial revelation in other religions, then by what authority can we say that God’s divine self-revelation in Jesus Christ is unique? Furthermore, does the salvation offered by Jesus Christ have universal significance or can salvation be found along other pathways? Finally, in light of our deep love for God and obedience to God’s call to “make disciples of all nations (Matt. 28:19), how should Christians approach people of other faiths?

It would be impossible in a discussion paper of this length to explore the broad range of possible responses to these questions found in the Christian community. Thus, I will present an Evangelical reply to the question of authority and revelation as they relate to Christian mission in an era of global religious diversity. This paper does not purport to represent the only or definitive Evangelical viewpoint; however, most statements made coincide with the views of historical Evangelical Christianity.
The Global Context of Modern Religious Pluralism – Christ is “one of many ways”

Religious pluralism has its roots in ancient human history. Christianity was birthed and has continued to grow in a social setting of many religious traditions, but Western Christianity has only recently come to recognize that fact. In centuries past, there was minimal interchange between different ethnic/religious groups in the Western world aside from economic trade and war; Christianity was the dominant religion. In contrast, Christians in the rest of the world have always lived in a pluralistic society. Unfortunately, Western theologians have until recently demonstrated little or no willingness to be informed by the missiology of brothers and sisters in Christ from the “younger churches” in Asia, Africa, Latin America, and the Middle East.

When the modern Protestant missionary movement began around the turn of the 19th century, people from other faith traditions still seemed far removed from the average Western mission supporter. However, in today’s globally interconnected world, people of different cultures meet on university campuses, in business meetings and intergovernmental organizations, in local ethnic restaurants and even over the backyard fence.

According to recent research, approximately 2.1 billion people in the world currently identify themselves as Christians, 1.2 billion as Muslims, 850 million as Hindus and 324 million as Buddhists. About 230 million people classify themselves as atheists. Within these major religious groupings there are many variations. Additional significant religious traditions include Judaism, African Traditional Religion (ATR), Native American religion, Chinese popular religion, Shintoism, Animism, and others.

The face of this global religious landscape is changing rapidly. Muslims are the fastest growing major religion; Buddhism is also experiencing significant growth, and Christianity is the fastest growing religion in the southern hemisphere, most notably in Africa. In fact, an oft-quoted trend in Christian mission scholarship is that “the center of gravity of the Christian world has moved to the South into Africa and Latin America and to the East into Asia.” Christianity is no longer a religion primarily of the North and/or the West.

How do Evangelical Christians justify mission – sharing the good news of Jesus Christ – in this multi-religious global context? This has become an issue of heated debate among Christians particularly in the last 25 years. Adding to the intensity of the debate is the fact that relativism has come to dominate contemporary Western culture and has become a foundational assumption of scholarly study. Religious relativists (or pluralists) in particular maintain that all religions are
equally valid and no one has the corner on truth. From this vantage point, truth is seen as relative; in today’s post-modern world there is no such thing as ultimate or absolute truth.\(^5\)

If all religions are equally valid as religious pluralists state, then it stands to reason that all religions represent different but equally valid paths to knowing the Absolute.\(^6\) It is commonly asserted that “all paths lead to God” – however you may personally refer to the Divine or to ultimate reality. Nevertheless, to claim essential parity between all religions demonstrates a profound ignorance of the competing truth claims of the different religious traditions, including one’s own. Religions are not all essentially the same as pluralists would argue: Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam, and Christianity, for example, teach contrasting concepts about God, the nature of humankind, the need for or path to salvation, the meaning (if any) in historical events, the purpose of and motivation for service to others, and the ultimate goal of life.\(^7\) Each religion teaches radically different ideas about reality; logically they cannot all be true. However, this does not imply that one religion is the sole proprietor of truth while all others represent complete falsehood. We will return to this point later in our discussion of revelation in various faith traditions. It is also important to distinguish between cultural pluralism and religious pluralism. One can affirm and appreciate cultural diversity without saying that all faiths are equally valid fountains of truth.\(^8\)

Keeping in mind the broad spectrum of religious traditions represented around the globe, we now proceed to an Evangelical Christian perspective on authority for mission.

*Mission by What Authority? – The uniqueness of Christ*

This paper is written from an Evangelical Christian perspective. An evangelical spirit can be found throughout the history of the church. However, it was only at the time of the Reformation that the name “evangelical” was initially given to Lutherans who sought to renew the spiritual vigor of the church through the proclamation of the gospel based on God’s authoritative word.\(^9\) Transcending denominational boundaries, evangelical fervor became an important spiritual movement among Methodists, Anglicans, Baptists, Congregationalists, Disciples of Christ, and Presbyterians, among others. By the twentieth century with the growth of mission societies in Asia, Africa and Latin America, evangelicalism became a global phenomenon.\(^10\) Thus, defining the term “evangelical” presents a challenge since Evangelicals do not constitute a separate denomination with a codified doctrine. Nevertheless, certain distinctives characterize the Evangelical viewpoint.

The hallmark of modern evangelicalism is the affirmation of the divine authority and sufficiency of Scripture.\(^11\) The Bible, inspired by God through the power of the Holy Spirit,
testifies to God’s sovereignty and to God’s self-revelation in Jesus Christ, the Word that became flesh (Jn. 1:1, 14). It reveals God’s character, God’s overall plan for humanity, and God’s active involvement in salvation history. Still, human words, even though divinely inspired, are inadequate to fully communicate the infinite reality of the living God. Thus, the Bible is “without error in all that it affirms, and the only infallible rule of faith and practice” according to the Lausanne Covenant. The divine authorship of the Bible makes it the most determinative source of knowledge about God and about God’s plan for the salvation and redemption of humankind and creation. This does not suggest that the Bible is the only source of knowledge or inspiration about God, but for the Evangelical Christian it is the standard against which all other knowledge must be evaluated. In other words, Scripture offers the ultimate criterion for religious truth, while still recognizing that truth may be found in other writings or traditions. We will return to this point later in this paper.

Scripture is a precious gift of God, but Evangelical Christians do not worship Scripture. “The ultimate, final authority is not in Scripture but the living God himself as we find him in Jesus Christ.” The Bible derives its authority from the One to whom it testifies – Jesus Christ, and not vice versa.

Evangelicals confess Jesus Christ as savior and Lord (Rom. 10:9-10). Jesus’ substitutionary death on the cross has saved us from the penalty that a just and holy God demands for our sins, and we are restored to right relationship with God. It is Christ’s life, death, and resurrection that offer hope, healing, and the promise of eternal life (Jn. 3:16) beginning the moment we accept God’s free gift of salvation by grace (Eph. 2:8-9). Evangelicals also confess the lordship of the Holy Spirit, the third Person of the Trinity.

Evangelical Christians emphasize the need for personal repentance and confession of faith in Jesus Christ. It is not enough to be born into a Christian family, baptized as an infant, or to profess an intellectual understanding of Christian doctrine. Further, there is a strong and urgent emphasis on the need for evangelism – sharing the good news of salvation in Jesus Christ. Finally, Evangelicals recognize the importance of learning and serving in Christian community.

Let us turn now to the question of authority for mission from an Evangelical perspective. “Mission” is not an easy term to define; some have made the concept so amorphous that it includes every activity done by the church. In this paper, mission refers to the proclamation of the gospel of Jesus Christ in word and deed so that others will come to know Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior and participate in the kingdom of God. Moreover, “social responsibility is an integral part of evangelization; and the struggle for justice can be a manifestation of the Kingdom of God.” Noted
missiologist Samuel Escobar points out that “mission also includes ‘compassion’ as a result of immersion among the multitudes. It is neither a sentimental burst of emotion nor an academic option for the poor, but definite and intentional actions of service in order to ‘feed the multitude’ with bread for life, as well as Bread of life.”

Evangelicals testify that it is by God’s authority given by Jesus Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit that we share the good news of what God has done for us. God is the Creator (Gen. 1 – 2); God is sovereign over the totality of existence. Consequently, God’s authority extends to all creation and human events – beyond the community of faith that confesses Jesus as Lord and Savior. There is no higher authority. God invites and allows us to participate in his plan to save and redeem humanity (Rom. 16:25-27) and restore us to full fellowship with God so that we can enjoy the abundant life God has prepared for us (Jn. 10:10). Thus, when we engage in mission, it is imperative that we recognize that we participate in missio dei – God’s mission in the world. As expressed in the Lausanne Covenant, God “has been calling out from the world a people for himself, and sending his people back into the world to be his servants and his witnesses, for the extension of his kingdom, the building up of Christ's body, and the glory of his name.” When we clothe the gospel message in our own cultural values or constrict the good news within the confines of our own political or economic framework, we cease to participate in God’s mission in the world.

Jesus’ Great Commission in Matthew 28:18-20 commands his followers to make disciples, baptize them in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and teach them to obey Jesus’ commands. The authority to share the gospel comes directly from Jesus Christ (v. 18). Jesus’ authority “is not a derived authority; it is the authority of God himself present in the midst of human history.” How do we know this? According to Scripture, Jesus is God incarnate. Jesus is creator and sustainer of the universe (Jn. 1:1; Col. 1:15-20). Jesus and the Father are one (Jn. 10:30); to know Jesus is to know God (Jn. 14:7).

Further, it is only by the power and presence of the Holy Spirit that the words and witness of a Christian can accomplish anything. The convincing logic of evangelical theology may provide a firm foundation for mission, but it is “the presence and power of the Holy Spirit in the life of the Church [that is] the source of missionary dynamism.” As both Evangelicals and Roman Catholics assert, “The Holy Spirit is indeed the principal agent of the whole of the Church's mission.” Thus, the authority to engage in mission is given by God through Jesus Christ who also enables Christians to act on God’s authority through the power of the Holy Spirit.
Jesus’ authority is unique and supreme, but in this multi-ethnic milieu of diverse religious and cultural perspectives, it seems the height of arrogance to claim that one culture, religion, or worldview represents absolute truth. How then can Christians claim that “Jesus is the only way to salvation”? If one accepts the authority of Scripture, one cannot escape Jesus’ proclamation of his uniqueness. Jesus says, “I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.” (Jn. 14:6) Furthermore, “Salvation is found in no one else and there is no other name under heaven by which we must be saved” (Acts 4:12; see also I Tim. 2:5).

Some misguided Christians misunderstand these passages, substituting the word “Christianity” for Jesus. However, no one has ever been saved by Christianity. In fact, the Christian tradition has an ample supply of errors, idolatry, atrocities, and mistakes for which we ought to humbly ask forgiveness. Evangelical Christians insist that salvation is found in a Person, not a Church or an institution.

Those who believe the Bible’s teaching that Jesus is the only way to salvation are often viewed by others as narrow-minded, intolerant bigots who denigrate every other faith tradition but their own. But must this be the outcome of the Evangelical understanding of mission by God’s authority? That is, if the salvation that Christ freely offers really is unique, can one logically conclude that all other faith traditions contain no element of truth and therefore must be rejected in their totality? This is the issue we will examine more fully in the next section on revelation.

**God’s Revelation in Jesus Christ – Unique or One of Many?**

Evangelical Christians believe that God’s revelation in Jesus Christ is unique and decisive. In the Evangelical–Roman Catholic Dialogue on Mission, both faith traditions affirmed “the absolute uniqueness of Jesus Christ.” Does that statement preclude revelation in other faith traditions or in creation in general? To answer that question, we must explore the idea of revelation.

“Revelation” is a notoriously difficult term to define. In Judeo-Christian theology, it refers to, “the personal self-disclosure of God within history” or put another way, it is “God’s communication to humans of divine truth, that is, his manifestation of himself or of his will.” Theologians commonly differentiate between general and special revelation. Through general revelation God reveals something of God’s character through the witness of creation (e.g. Ps. 8; Ps. 19:1; Acts 14:17, 17:26-27; Rom. 1:19-20) and of human reason, experience, and history. The stars, a majestic mountain range, a raging river, a soaring eagle, and a microscopic multi-legged marine creature all reflect something of God’s power, beauty, order, and the gift of life. God’s
nature can also be discovered through human experience – the exercise of reason, moral decision making, individual insight, and working together in community for the common good. Also, observing and analyzing the ebb and flow of history gives us an indication of how God works in the world, though “not all history reveals God.”

Special revelation refers to God’s revelation through Scripture and in God’s interaction with human beings both historically (e.g. Moses, Hagar, Jacob, the prophets, Mary, and Paul) and at the present time through the ministry of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit reveals God to us (Jn. 14:25-26; 16:12-15; I Jn. 2:20; Eph. 1:17-18) most often through a dynamic interchange between Scripture, the Holy Spirit and the believer. The Holy Spirit illuminates Scripture to us, allowing it to dynamically interact with our lives so that it guides, challenges, convicts, and encourages (I Cor. 2:9-16; I Jn. 2:20, 27). By the power of the Spirit, Scripture becomes the living Word (Heb. 4:12), God’s revelation to us in our particular situation. As a result of this dynamic interaction, God’s Word transforms individuals, communities, and entire cultures.

Other theologians such as Avery Dulles and Alister McGrath offer a more subtle delineation of the multiple aspects of revelation including doctrine (i.e. tradition), history, inner experience, dialectical presence, and new awareness. The existence of various models of revelation reflects the fact that revelation is a complex concept, not easily reduced to words. Thus, though we can learn much about God through general and special revelation (or other models of revelation), we cannot know everything there is to know about God (Deut. 29:29; Is. 55:8). As McGrath notes, “the revelation of God does not abolish the mystery of God.”

God has chosen many ways to make himself known to humanity, but God’s fullest self-revelation is in the person of Jesus Christ. Evangelicals point to the astounding fact that Jesus Christ is God’s ultimate self-revelation, the Word that became flesh (Jn. 1:1, 14). “The Absolute has become concrete in history in the person of Jesus” (Jn. 14:6-7). Yet mystery endures since “Jesus is totus Deus but not totum Dei. He is wholly God but not all of God.” There is more to God than we can ever know. Still, Scripture teaches that Jesus “is the image of the invisible God” and that “God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him” (Col. 1:15, 19). Jesus reveals the Father (Matt. 11:27) and declares his co-identity with God: “Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father” … “I am in the Father and the Father is in me” (Jn. 14:9-11; also Jn. 10:33-38) and “all things have been committed to me by my Father” (Lk. 10:22). Note that there are not multiple revelations, but One revelation in whom God has fully and definitively revealed himself once and for all time. Jesus is “the eschatologically final (…unsurpassable) revelation.” Jesus has supreme
authority. Jesus is Lord (Phil. 2:6-11) – of all creation, humankind, history, of the present and the future.

Armed with the assurance of Jesus’ supreme authority, some missionaries have distorted the gospel message, wrapping it securely in the clothing, customs and worldview of their own particular culture. Asian theologian Anthony Fernando indicts the Western mission movement with this observation: “‘Jesus’ may not necessarily stand for ‘Jesus, the supreme Way’; ‘Jesus’ can just as well be a substitute for ‘we of Western culture,’ and then ‘Jesus is unique’ could mean simply, ‘We of the Western culture are unique’”! Shamefully, missionaries of all traditions have often failed to distinguish between gospel and culture. Consequently, people in receiving cultures often believe that they must renounce their own cultural traditions in order to become Christian. With a spirit of repentance, Evangelicals and Catholics agreed that missionaries “endeavor to take seriously the people to whom they have come, with their worldview and way of life so that they may find their own authentic way of experiencing and expressing the salvation of Christ.”

The gospel does not prescribe a specific kind of music, architecture, liturgy, clothing, or social event. On the contrary, “the gospel dignifies every culture as a valid and acceptable vehicle for God’s revelation…there is no “sacred” culture or language that may be considered as the only vehicle God might use.” The gospel adapts to all cultures, transforming them (including that of the missionary!), not destroying them.

Now we come to one of the most difficult questions regarding our relationship with people of other faith traditions and with those who profess no particular faith. If Jesus Christ is God’s fullest self-revelation and therefore unique, is this revelation definitive and universal for all humankind? Responses to this question generally fall into three broad categories: pluralist, inclusivist, and exclusivist.

Pluralists emphasize the theocentric view of religions. God/the Transcendent Being (or whatever name is used to refer to this supreme entity) is at the center of all religions. If that proposition is correct, then the premise that “all paths lead to God” makes logical sense. A corollary argument is that no religion can be said to be “superior” since all truth is relative. From this perspective, Jesus is only one of many possible paths to salvation. Therefore, pluralists maintain that mission is pointless and inevitably shows a deep disregard for the legitimacy of other equally valid faith traditions.

Inclusivists maintain that Jesus’ sacrificial death and resurrection made salvation available to all people; it is up to each person to choose whether or not to accept that free gift of grace. Some theologians take inclusivism a step further toward universalism. Universalism emphasizes that God
desires that all should be saved and since God is omnipotent and full of grace and mercy, God will find a way to achieve that goal even apart from or outside of the Christian faith.\textsuperscript{40} In contrast to the universalist perspective, Evangelicals profess God’s abiding love for all people but do not affirm that “all people are either automatically or ultimately saved, still less to affirm that all religions offer salvation in Christ.\textsuperscript{41} Inclusivists affirm cultural pluralism (appreciation of the value of all cultures) without confusing this with religious pluralism. Admittedly, this is a challenging position given the inseparable intertwining of religion and culture in much of the world.

Traditional exclusivists insist that Christianity is the sole expression of truth – no other faiths have any fragment of truth embodied in their traditions.\textsuperscript{42} One must make a personal profession of faith in Jesus Christ during this lifetime in order to be saved; all who do not are condemned to everlasting punishment in hell. All communication with other faith traditions is rejected except to convert them to the one truth; other religions must be replaced with Christianity.\textsuperscript{43} In its most radical form, exclusivism can be used to justify the use of all means (including force) to bring others to a profession of faith in Christ to save them from the horror of eternal suffering.\textsuperscript{44}

Most twentieth century Evangelicals would fall somewhere in the inclusivist camp, as it is the position most consistent with a high view of the authority of Scripture. Some would also subscribe to the exclusivist position. Only by dismissing the authority and authenticity of Scripture can one argue a case for pluralism (all paths lead to God) – or universalism (all will be saved). A pluralist perspective must be rejected since it disregards the Scriptural admonitions to share the gospel and thus undermines the urgency for mission. It also calls into serious question any claims of the uniqueness and salvific universality of Jesus Christ. As one scholar put it:

“…If Jesus Christ is not God incarnate, if he is not the final and normative revelation of God and the culmination of God’s saving work for humanity, if he is not the reigning Lord and coming Judge of the world, then we have to conclude that the Christian church down the centuries has completely misunderstood him, exaggerated his importance and inflated his claims. … they were wrong…self-deluded…the greatest blasphemers the world has ever seen!…[they have] lived a lie…[and] are guilty of the most monstrous idolatry.”\textsuperscript{45}

In short, if the gospel is not true, then inviting people to follow Jesus is a sham, certainly no act of love.\textsuperscript{46} Exclusivism has more support in Scripture but it de-emphasizes God’s love and mercy in favor of God’s judgment.

What about people who have never heard of God or Jesus Christ? Are they consigned to hell or oblivion because they did not accept God’s gift of grace in Jesus Christ? Let us review what we know according to Scripture. Jesus Christ was chosen by God before creation (I Pet. 1:20) to be
the sin-bearer to take on the guilt of broken humanity. His death and resurrection ushered in a new humanity reconciled to God (2 Cor. 5:21; I Pet. 2:24; Rom. 8:29; Cor. 15:49, 2 Cor. 3:18; Gal 4:19; Phil. 3:21). From Genesis to Revelation, we are told of God’s great love for humankind and God’s desire to bless all nations and every individual. In the New Testament, we are told that God wants all humankind to be saved and to come to know and obey God (Rom. 16:26; I Tim. 2:4; 2 Pet. 3:9). There is no hint of exclusivism in these passages. God’s love is all-inclusive. Furthermore, God is merciful and just and so those who do not know Christ will be judged according to what they do know, according to the law that God has written on every human heart (Rom. 2:12-16).

Do we dare then to “write off any human being as beyond God’s redeeming love?” Scripture states that salvation – freedom, forgiveness, and renewal – is found only in Jesus Christ (Jn. 14:6; Acts 4:12). Christ died for all (Rom. 5:6-8; 2 Cor. 5:14-15) but not all accept the gift of salvation during their lifetime. God leaves the decision to accept God’s gracious gift of love and be restored to full relationship with him through Jesus Christ up to the individual. Because God is a God of justice, God also allows us to reject this gift of love and to suffer the consequences of that decision. God has not given us all the details of what happens after death. We do not know if there is another opportunity for repentance and redemption at the moment of or after death, an idea sometimes described as “eschatalogical evangelism.” If there is, the possibility of eternal damnation also still exists. Our confidence rests in the sure knowledge that God is a God of love, justice, mercy and holiness. Therefore, “we need to work as if all depended on us, and yet trust God’s grace for those we cannot reach, confessing that God will deal justly and mercifully with them in ways beyond our ability to perceive.”

God’s Revelation in other Faith Traditions

Given that Evangelicals profess the uniqueness and salvific universality of Jesus Christ, to what extent can we recognize revelation in other faith traditions? Is there revelation outside the Christian fence? In their Dialogue on Mission, Evangelicals and Roman Catholics agreed that “there are elements of truth in all religions. These truths are the fruit of a revelatory gift of God.” In concert with this perspective, Indian theologian D.T. Niles notes that Christians need to recognize and celebrate the fact that God is at work in all persons in all places. The true light that enlightens everyone comes from God (Jn. 1:9). We make God too small when we limit God’s work to the sphere of Christian communities. As Evangelical Christians interact with persons from other faiths, we stand on common ground with Catholics who declare that “the Catholic Church rejects
nothing of what is true and holy in these religions.”53 Within the context of Christian mission, it is a well-documented fact that God has been at work in non-Christian communities long before the missionaries arrive. God goes before the missionary to prepare people to receive the good news of Jesus the savior.

Though Scripture offers no direct statements regarding God’s revelation in other religions, Scripture does provide a number of examples of God at work “outside the fence” of Judeo-Christian tradition. Scripture declares that, “by Christ all things were created” (Col. 1:16) and therefore we find “signs, rays and disclosures of God’s nature and purposes” throughout creation and in human thought and history.54 Melchizedek, a Canaanite priest-king, knew and worshipped a Supreme divinity before meeting Abraham (Gen. 14:17-24). Others outside the Jewish community recognized the God of Abraham as the true God (e.g. Rahab – Josh. 2:10-11; Nebuchadnezzar – Dan. 2:46-7, 3:28, 4:34-37). Secular Greek poets Epimenides and Aratus of the 6th and 3rd century B.C.E. respectively, evidently possessed some level of knowledge about God even though they had no connection with the Hebrew faith since Paul quotes them in his exhortation to the Athenians (Acts 17). Jesus himself praised the faith of Gentiles such as the Canaanite woman (Matt. 15:21-28), the Samaritan man (Lk. 10:25-37), and the “foreigner” leper who was the only one out of ten to return and thank Jesus for healing (Lk. 17:18). Jesus used the example of non-believers to help his own followers to better understand God’s revelation to them.55

Clearly, people experience God outside the bounds of Christianity. Indeed, as so clearly stated in the Catholic declaration Dominus Iesus “it is the Spirit who sows the ‘seeds of the word’ present in various customs and cultures, preparing them for full maturity in Christ.”56 Christians need not wear religious blinders that prevent us from recognizing the truth, beauty, and wisdom of other faith traditions. To do so would be to deny God’s sovereignty over all creation and suggest that God has only been at work among those who recognize God’s lordship. Jesus is the Truth but that does not preclude the existence of truth in other religions that do not confess Jesus as Lord. Evangelicals maintain that it simply requires Christians to evaluate those truths in light of the Truth of Jesus Christ.57 Truths in other religions may also help Christians to discover truth in the gospel that we have overlooked, ignored, or distorted. For example, the insights of Native Americans about the sacredness of the earth and the interrelatedness of all creation illumine what it means to be stewards of God’s creation. Furthermore, because culture and religion are inseparable in some parts of the world, the affirmation of truth and beauty in other religions is for some “a struggle of their people to emerge from the spiritual and cultural humiliation of colonialism.”58 To our shame as
followers of Christ, Christian mission springing from Western nations has sometimes been the handmaiden of economic and political imperialism.

Many Evangelicals maintain that God reveals himself in a limited way in other religions but “such non-Christian revelation is profoundly limited and cannot lead to an authentic, saving knowledge of God.”\textsuperscript{59} Indeed, not every revelation is inspired of God. There are many wicked, life-destroying forces at work in the world. If some Christians say that there are elements of the demonic in other religions we must also confess and repent of the ways that Christianity itself has been used for demonic purposes (for example, in the Ku Klux Klan, and by those espousing apartheid and anti-Semitism). Evangelicals firmly assert that every revelation, including those proffered by Christianity, must be measured against the plumb line of Scripture under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Does it coincide with or contradict what we know to be God’s will and purpose in creation according to Scripture and as revealed by Jesus Christ? If it coincides, Christians need to celebrate God’s presence and discover the ways God has revealed himself in other faith traditions.

To recognize God’s presence in other religions is not to say that all religions are basically the same. Unquestionably, they are not. If Christianity is understood as simply one of many equally legitimate pathways to God, none of which represent any higher truth than another, then Christians must disregard the good news of Jesus Christ as the incarnation of God in whom God has chosen to unite all humankind. Nevertheless, professing God’s definitive self-revelation in Jesus Christ does not suggest that Christians know all there is to know about God. On the contrary, believers in Christ still have much to learn from others. New insights may deepen knowledge of God or open up heretofore unseen vistas of God, but they must not contradict what we know of God as revealed in Jesus Christ. Thus, there can be no “new” revelation that supercedes God’s revelation in Jesus Christ (e.g. through Islam, Mormonism, Christian Science and others).

\textit{A Call to Conversation and Conversion}

Firmly rooted in Scripture, Evangelicals hold two propositions in tension: the uniqueness and salvific universality of Jesus Christ and the recognition of God’s activity in all of creation including other religions. In a multi-cultural world of many faith traditions, however, this is a minority viewpoint. How then shall Evangelicals proceed in mission when others do not recognize the authority of Scripture or God’s self-revelation in Jesus Christ? What assurance, motivation, and demeanor should Christians embrace as we engage in mission?
The Evangelical perspective leads to the conclusion that our assurance and motivation for mission ought to spring from a desire to share the good news of Jesus Christ in love by the power of the Holy Spirit. The assurance to engage in mission rests on the knowledge that we are not the ones in charge. Jesus, sent by the Father, calls, equips and sends Christians out to share the gospel with all nations (Matt. 28:18-20); the Holy Spirit is the one who empowers all mission activity by moving in the hearts of both sender and receiver (Acts 1:8). The goal of mission is not to gain one more member of the Church; it is to lovingly introduce the living Lord to others. Love compels Christians to share the gospel, especially with those who are in rebellion against God or who live out worldviews antithetical to the gospel message. Christians need to find ways to proclaim and live the good news of Christ that speak to the hearts of those with distinctive convictions and worldviews different from their own. Jesus leads the way in this endeavor for Christ “is our peace, who has made the two one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility” (Eph. 2:14). Those who respond to the good news of Jesus Christ “are incorporated into God’s new, worldwide, multi-racial, multi-cultural community, which is the Father’s Family, the Body of Christ, and temple of the Holy Spirit.”

Most Evangelicals would agree that the demeanor of a missionary ought to be that of honesty, integrity, humility, and repentance. Missionaries ought to avoid superficial conversations that gloss over genuine differences and present a façade of religious convergence that generally leaves the really important issues unaddressed. If we all agree to agree, what is there to discuss? Instead, Christians should witness “to our deepest convictions, whilst listening to those of our neighbors” (as stated in the WCC Guidelines on Dialogue with People of Living Faiths and Ideologies). We can disagree with one another and still talk; disagreement need not necessarily breed contempt or disregard. Christians would do well to heed Paul’s exhortation to share our faith “with gentleness and respect” (I Pet. 3:15), recognizing that we have much to learn from one another about who God is and how God works in the world.

Additionally, remembering the cultural imperialism present in much of mission history, “it is important to be alert against forms of evangelism and conversion that appear more as the imposition of foreign cultural patterns on the receptors of the gospel.”

In light of the Evangelical understanding of authority and revelation and given the context of religious pluralism, Evangelical Christians are challenged to recognize and celebrate how God has revealed himself in other faith traditions. This approach requires a measure of humility, recognizing that we (Christians) do not carry God in our suitcase when we enter another culture. God has been working in that context long before the first missionary arrived! There also should be
an attitude of repentance, acknowledging that there are times when Christians of all kinds have
gotten the message terribly wrong. We have often fallen prey to the arrogant attitude that we are the
rightful owners of God’s truth rather than “the undeserving recipients of grace.”

While Christians claim to know the Truth (Jn. 16:4), we are yet pilgrims on a journey to
grasp the full implication of that truth. God may well use our interaction with others to convict us
of our own shortcomings and limited views. Thus, when we engage in mission with the hope for
conversion, we may well find that sharing the good news with others has also transformed us!

**Summary and Conclusion**

Christian mission is the proclamation of the gospel in word and deed with the intent to invite
people into a personal relationship with Jesus Christ and enable them to participate in the
kingdom of God. Mission of this nature is often met with skepticism and even animosity in today’s
world of diverse religious and cultural traditions. Additionally, moral relativism and religious
pluralism are dominant themes in much though not all of the world. Within this context of religious
diversity, many espouse the view that “all paths lead to God.” This view demonstrates profound
ignorance of the radical discontinuities between faith traditions. All paths do indeed lead
somewhere, but not necessarily to the same destination.

Evangelical Christians contend that Scripture testifies to God’s ultimate self-revelation in
Jesus Christ. In Jesus we encounter the living God. God, through Jesus Christ, grants us the
authority to engage in mission empowered by the Holy Spirit who acts on sender and receiver alike
as they join together in God’s work in the world. That having been said, mission done by the
authority of Jesus Christ is not a mandate for arrogant triumphalism. Rather, we must recognize our
inability to act consistently in Jesus’ name, grateful that he continues to honor our feeble intentions
to participate in God’s mission by the power of the Holy Spirit.

God’s revelation in Jesus Christ is unique and decisive, but God continues to reveal himself
in creation, in human experience, and most especially in Scripture when it is illumined by the Holy
Spirit. This continuing revelation is natural and partial in contrast to God’s fullest revelation in
Jesus Christ.

God offers grace, mercy, forgiveness, and salvation to all people. Some people accept that
gift, others reject it, while still others never hear of it in their lifetime. God has not disclosed to us
the details of what happens to those who do not profess Jesus Christ in their lifetime. Our
confidence must rest in the sure knowledge that we serve a God of love and mercy as well as justice.

Scripture is clear that God desires that all people know and worship God. In God’s sovereignty, God plants seeds of truth in other religions but these truths always need to be measured against the truth of Christ. We ought to rejoice when we find evidence of God’s kingly reign in religions and cultures other than our own. All cultures, transformed by the gospel, find a home in the kingdom of God.

How then should Christians share the good news of Jesus Christ? Evangelicals assert that Christians ought not to behave as if “my religious tradition is better than all others.” It is not about religion. It is about whether Jesus Christ is in fact God’s ultimate self-revelation. Jesus was God incarnate who lived, was crucified, who rose after death and whose living Presence continues to act in the world. If Jesus is the fullest revelation of God, then all other “revelations” are inadequate insofar as they vary from that of Jesus Christ. Likewise, Christianity is “superior” to other faith traditions only insofar as its theology and practices conform to, reflect, and embody the character and purposes of God as revealed in Jesus Christ.

The bottom line for Evangelicals is that Christians are bound by our love for God to invite others into relationship with the living Lord, Jesus Christ. Remembering that the Holy Spirit is the one who motivates and empowers Christians to share the gospel (Acts 1:8; 2:4), we need to engage in mission with passion tempered by humility, remembering that it is God’s mission, not ours. In this way, Christians can faithfully respond to God’s call to share and live the good news of Jesus Christ and invite people to enjoy the blessings of God’s kingdom.
Bibliography


Endnotes

3 “Religions of the World: Numbers of adherents; rates of growth,” based on data from the U.S. Center for World Mission, on-line, available from http://www.religioustolerance.org/worldrel.htm#wce
4 Myers, 55.
5 The flaw in this position becomes evident if one asks pluralists if they hold as absolute truth the assertion that there is no absolute truth.
15 Lesslie Newbigin, Truth and Authority in Modernity (Vallely Forge: Trinity Press International, 1996), 16-58. The length of this paper does not permit a discussion of the relationship between Scripture, tradition and authority; however, a brief comment may be included. Scripture and tradition cannot be easily separated. Certainly, our understanding of Scripture is heavily influenced by the generations that preceded us in our particular religious context. However, Evangelicals would maintain that tradition has authority only insofar as it is consistent with the Scriptural witness. The same criteria would apply with regard to reason and experience.
16 McGrath, 121-122.
22 “The Purpose of God,” The Lausanne Covenant, par. 1.
25 Escobar, 84
27 Charles Van Engen, *Mission on the Way: Issues in Mission Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker House Books, 1996), 170. The question of the authority and uniqueness of Christ has been a topic of concern and debate since the first century. It was directly addressed at the International Missionary Council’s meeting in Tambaram, Madras, India in 1938, by Roman Catholics especially after the Second Vatican Council, and by the World Council of churches in the latter half of the 20th century. However, it was only in the very late 20th century that Evangelicals began to address this topic in earnest.
30 Elwell, 1021.
41 “The Uniqueness and Universality of Christ,” The Lausanne Covenant, 1974. The whole passage reads as follows: We affirm that there is only one Saviour and only one gospel, although there is a wide diversity of evangelistic approaches. We recognise that everyone has some knowledge of God through his general revelation in nature. But we deny that this can save, for people suppress the truth by their unrighteousness. We also reject as derogatory to Christ and the gospel every kind of syncretism and dialogue which implies that Christ speaks equally through all religions and ideologies. Jesus Christ, being himself the only God-man, who gave himself as the only ransom for sinners, is the only mediator between God and people. There is no other name by which we must be saved. All men and women are perishing because of sin, but God loves everyone, not wishing that any should perish but that all should repent. Yet those who reject Christ repudiate the joy of salvation and condemn themselves to eternal separation from God. To proclaim Jesus as “the Saviour of the world” is not to affirm that all people are either automatically or ultimately saved, still less to affirm that all religions offer salvation in Christ. Rather it is to proclaim God’s love for a world of sinners and to invite everyone to respond to him as Saviour and Lord in the wholehearted personal commitment of repentance and faith. Jesus Christ has been exalted above every other name; we long for the day when every knee shall bow to him.
and every tongue shall confess him Lord. (Gal. 1:6-9; Rom. 1:18-32; I Tim. 2:5,6; Acts 4:12; John 3:16-19; II Pet. 3:9; II Thess. 1:7-9; John 4:42; Matt. 11:28; Eph. 1:20,21; Phil. 2:9-11)


50 Covell, 170.


53 Thomas, 271. Quoted from the “Declaration on the Relationship of the Church to Non-Christian Religions,” Vatican II.


55 McDermott, 77-89.


57 Van Engen in Winter and Hawthorne, 166.

58 Newbigin, The Gospel in a Pluralist Society, 156.

59 Knitter, 86.

60 Newbigin, The Open Secret, 182.


63 Escobar, “Missionary Dynamism,” 82.

64 Thomas, 272.