

The Translatability of the Christian Gospel

ASBURY THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

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CONVOCATION ADDRESS

INTRODUCTION

In April of 1739, John Wesley was preaching in an upstairs room in London. About halfway into his sermon, the supporting post, which held up the floor of the room, collapsed under the sheer weight of the number of people who had gathered to hear Wesley. Wesley remarked in his journal that the supporting post fell with a great noise. The floor sunk, but it didn't cave in. To Wesley's own amazement, everyone settled back down, and he was able to finish preaching.

What do we do when it seems like the very floor under our feet is giving way? Many of the traditional props and supports, which have long given stability to the world of theological education, have fallen away with a great crash—what are we to do? How do we live in a time of disequilibrium, of uncertainty, and of change? Never in history has the Church undergone such dramatic growth and change so quickly. When William Carey went to India in 1793, 99 percent of all Christians in the world were white and lived in the western world. Today, the vast majority of Christians live outside the Western world. We are witnessing multiple centers of Christian vibrancy, even as we see the western world re-emerging as the world's fastest growing mission field and the home of the most resistant people groups in the world. In contrast, all of the top gospel-receptive people groups in the world are found in either India or China. We live in an upside down world.

- *Christianity Today* reported a few years ago that 85 percent of the members of Yale University's Campus Crusade for Christ chapter are Asian, whereas "the university's Buddhist meditation meetings are almost exclusively attended by whites."
- *The World Christian Encyclopedia* records that more Anglican Christians worship in Nigeria in any given week than all the Episcopal and Anglican churches of Europe and North America combined!
- An examination of *World Christian Trends* reveals that there are now more evangelical Christians in Nepal than in Spain.
- The historic William Carey Memorial Church in Lester, England, is now a Hindu temple while the church in India, the traditional home of Hinduism, sends out over 41,000 cross-cultural missionaries, a movement which I have given 21 years of my life to encourage.
- China can now boast of the fastest growing church in the world, with an estimated 16,500 new Christians every day. Africa, once called the missionary graveyard, can boast of the fastest growing church for any continent as a whole; 24,000 new Christians every day. The most representative Christian in 1909 was a 47-year-old British male. The most representative Christian in 2009 was a 24-year-old Nigerian woman.

The support post upon which was written “you are the center of the ecclesiastical universe” has collapsed, and we have to regain our footing in this new world we inhabit and think afresh about what this means for theological education in North America. None of these developments were predicted fifty years ago. Today, as I survey the landscape of ecclesiology and theological education in the Western world, it is clear that we are living in a time of unprecedented crisis. This is not to be overly negative or alarmist, for I am reminded of the great Dutch missiologist, Hendrick Kraemer (1888-1965), who famously commented that “the Church is always in a state of crisis; its greatest shortcoming is that it is only occasionally aware of it.”

The floor is creaking beneath our feet.

What does this mean for Asbury Theological Seminary in the 21st century?

I will make three observations...

1

Embracing Cultural and Theological Translatability

First, we must understand afresh the *profound translatability of the Christian message*. Christianity is the only world religion whose primary source documents are in a language other than the founder of the religion. In other words, the New Testament texts are not in Aramaic, but in Koine Greek. This is unique among world religions. Muhammad spoke in Arabic, and the Qur'an is in Arabic. The Brahmin priests in India spoke Sanskrit, and the Vedas and Upanishads are in Sanskrit. However, in the New Testament, Jesus spoke primarily in Aramaic, but the primary documents which

record those sayings are in Koine Greek. This makes a vitally important theological statement which so dramatically contrasts, for example, with Muslims who maintain that the Qur'an is untranslatable and that the Word of Allah can be conveyed truly and fully only in Arabic. For, at the very outset of the Christian message, the translatability of the gospel is enshrined in our primary source documents.

You would under-realize this point if you only see this as the necessary green light to translate the Bible into every known tongue

in the world—in other words, *linguistic* translatability. It is, of course, that; but it is also the more profound translatability of culture. Indeed, it is this larger point which is the reason *why* the New Testament is not in Aramaic. In the Book of Acts, we are witnessing a massive cultural translation between a church which is predominantly Jewish in its historical and cultural context and one which begins to be received and experienced by Gentile Christians who bring new questions and new vocabulary to the table. “Do we have to be circumcised?” they asked. The amazing shift from Jesus as Messiah (Jesus Christ) to Lord Jesus quietly occurs. The Jerusalem Council decision in Acts 15 was certainly one of the most profound moments in the history of the early Church. They choose, quite intentionally, to honor their Judaic roots (thereby the restrictions) even while encouraging the gospel’s transmission into the Gentile world. Those first-century believers were full-blooded Jews by faith, culture, and experience; but they choose, under God, to not absolutize that culture or that heritage and to not insist that it be normative for all future believers. That is why we can be here today.

This cultural translatability has profound implications for our work in every discipline in our school, but for sake of time I will focus on the work of theology. Theology can no longer assume that all the questions which could be asked have been asked, and we cannot assume they have all been posed to the biblical texts either. As new cultures in non-Christian and multi-religious contexts come at the text from outside the walls of historic Christendom, they are becoming eager readers of the Bible, and they are posing new questions which have not previously been asked. This is an exciting day to be hammering away in God’s theological workshop. The global Church will continue to insist that theology will become more closely aligned with *ethics* in a way which we have not seen since the patristic era. [A global vindication of Wesleyan theological impulses is deep in our DNA, but we’ve been too distracted in recent decades to properly celebrate.] Theology will become more *missiological* in a way which we have not seen since the writings of St. Paul. Theology will become more *ecumenical*, without losing sight of the *kerygma*, in a way which we have not seen since the Carolingian commentaries. This is because theology will become simultaneously more diverse and more global while, at the same time, becoming more fully orthodox and centered on the *kerygma*.

2

Expanding our Ecclesiastical Cartography: The Role of the West in Global Christianity

The second implication of this new world we inhabit is the need to *expand our ecclesiastical cartography*. Can you picture in your mind one of those old world maps produced in the Middle Ages? Maps of the world produced by Europeans during the medieval period reveal much about their worldview. Europe and the Mediterranean (from *medius terra*, meaning “middle earth”—this is before we had discovered Hobbits!) are situated at the center of the map. The maps were filled with striking details of Europe and the Mediterranean beautifully adorned with various Christian images. However, most of Africa and Asia are not even represented, and the few distorted land masses that vaguely represent the southern continents tend to blend hazily into the margins amidst drawings of savages, dog-headed kings, and grotesque demons.

These maps reveal as much about European theology as about their cartography. In fact, it was from the lips of Jonathan Bonk, director of the Overseas Ministries Study Center, that

I first heard the phrase “ecclesiastical cartography” as a reference to how the Church views the world. Undoubtedly, our cartography has improved dramatically over the years, but it seems that our theological analysis of the world has not kept pace. In my earlier point, I noted that many of us still see the West as the ecclesiastical center of the world, even though the vast majority of Christians in the world today are located elsewhere.

However, as the sun rises on the Majority World Church, there is a second problem which we face here in the West. Sometimes the emphasis on global Christianity and directives to notice what is happening in the global south or, as I prefer, the Majority World Churches, has caused westerners, especially white European-descent Americans, to feel like God is moving everywhere but here—the shifting center of Christian gravity has moved beyond us and we are, if I can use the phrase in a different context, “left behind.” There was a period in theological and missiological literature which framed it in this way. We found ourselves in the ecclesiastical equivalent of the wood shed. We were left hanging by a thread as an embarrassing, post-colonial whipping boy, a poster child for everything that the church has done wrong. Mercifully, thanks to the work of the Gambian scholar Lamin Sanneh, among others, we are now making further adjustments to our ecclesiastical cartography by realizing that there is a vitally important distinction between a post-Western Christianity and a post-Christian West. Christianity may, indeed be emerging globally as a post-Western faith, but the post-Christian West can experience renewal as it embraces this post-Western faith within its context. Far from being “left behind,” God is shaking us free from our ecclesiastical provincialism and our equating Christianity with the western forms of it, and we are beginning to explore a new, previously unexplored country. In the 19th century, God commanded us to Christianize Africa. In the 21st century, He may very well be calling us to Africanize Christianity. In His sovereignty, God may have permitted the decline of Western Christianity in order to shake us free from the weakened, domesticated version which became the standard bearer of Christendom. Today, the West is re-discovering the vibrancy of historic, Apostolic Christianity with all of its prophetic surprises and anointed vibrancy.

What are the signs of this?

Sign 1

The ethnic diversity of the global Church is moving rapidly into North America. Global Christianity is not just about Africans and Koreans and Chinese and Brazilians and Indians and a host of others “over there”, but these are the new realities in our own towns and cities. The largest churches in Western Europe are pastored by African Christians. The fastest growing churches in North America are the ethnic churches. Global Christianity is actually the greatest force for renewal in the North. Yes, we are finally discovering the truth of that wonderful phrase which is the slogan of the Lausanne movement: The whole Church bringing the whole gospel to the whole world. Or, to use the words of Samuel Escobar’s excellent little book on this subject, *The Gospel from Everywhere to Everywhere*. John Wesley said, “the world is my parish.” Today, we could easily say, “the world is **in** my parish.” Today, if Dorothy in the wonderful book and movie, *Wizard of Oz*, had left 1934 Kansas, and instead of being whisked away by a tornado to the land of Oz, she had come right back down to 2009 Kansas, she still would have looked around and said, “Toto, we’re not in Kansas, anymore!”

Sign 2

We must recognize the unique place we are in as Christians in the 21st century. Christianity, unlike Hinduism or Islam, has had serial, not progressive, growth. In other words, what was once a vital center of Christian vitality has languished, while the center of the world Christian movement has constantly shifted. We can trace the shifting center of Christian vibrancy from Jerusalem to Rome to Alexandria to Constantinople to Western Europe and so forth. The shifting of Christianity to a new center of cultural vibrancy is not new. What is new today, for the first time in history, is that we are not seeing the emergence of a single new center of Christian vibrancy. Instead, we are witnessing the simultaneous emergence of multiple centers of vibrancy... in China... in India... in Korea... in Brazil... And, yes, here in the United States.

The United States will continue to be one of those centers of vitality. Even as late as the year 2050, the United States will still have more Christians than any other country. However, we will be closely followed by China in Asia and Brazil in Latin America. We are experiencing the dawn of a truly global Christian movement—more indigenous Christians firmly rooted in more places than at any time in the history of the world.

Sign 3

We must understand that the center of Christianity only refers to the aggregate of all Christians everywhere. This says nothing about the center of gravity for *financial resources* for global Christian work. This says nothing about the center of gravity of *graduate level theological education* programs. This says nothing about the center of gravity for the availability of *Christian books*. More Christians globally praise God in Spanish than any other language, including English. However, there are far more books about Christianity written in English than any other language. The center of gravity for graduate level theological education will remain in North America for the entirety of your generation. Thus, we have a global disparity between where you can get graduate level theological training and where the most Christians actually live. I noted earlier that the most representative Christian (globally speaking) would be a 24-year-old Nigerian woman. However, the most representative graduate student of theology remains overwhelmingly white and western, although the Africans, Indians and Koreans are making excellent progress. This makes Asbury Theological Seminary uniquely poised to assist in the training and equipping of the global Church and, speaking frankly, to be trained and equipped, ourselves, by the global Church. We need to receive a new wave of Majority World scholars, and we need to find ourselves in the training centers of the global Church. Asbury Seminary, in all of its manifestations as embodied in Kentucky, Florida, and ExL, must become a gateway to the global Church, and the traffic must be two-way.

3

Serious Reflection in a World of Twitter

Finally, my third and final point is the necessity to reaffirm the seriousness of our task. We need to re-affirm serious reflection in a world of twitter. Julius Caesar famously said in the wake of his stunning victory in the east: *veni, vidi, vici*—I came, I saw, I conquered. That famous phrase *veni, vidi, vici* has become almost the summarizing motto of the ancient world, especially the confident, unbridled triumphalism of the Roman era. If their motto was “I came, I saw, I conquered,” what would be the 21st century North American counterpart? I think it would be... *I came, I saw, and I twittered*. Think about it, twitter only allows 140 characters... everything must be said in 140 letters, or you can't say it. What an apt metaphor for today! We live in a reductionistic world with little time for serious reflection. Indeed, if the glorious gospel of Jesus Christ can be reduced to Four Spiritual Laws, then surely we can do graduate theological education in a few long weekends, right?

We live in a world which is inundated with information, but most of it is trivial. We live in a day which eschews serious, long-term, reflection. In short, we live in a world where the overwhelming mantra of theological education is “make it cheap and quick, or we'll go somewhere else.”

If we were graduating Masters in sacred twitterology we could do it; a few basic twitorials and you're on your way. Most of you grew up in the Nike generation of "just do it." However, you are training to go forth and inhabit the blogosphere world of twittering and Facebook where "just do it" has been replaced by "just say it." WWJD, What Would Jesus Do, has been quietly supplanted by WWJT... What Would Jesus Tweet?

Here at Asbury Seminary, God is calling us to remember the kind of robust, muscular, Apostolic Christianity which is required to face the challenges of our day. It will not be quick or easy, and you already know without me telling you that it will not be cheap. It will take sacrifice and some long nights of holy lamenting. You must wake up to the new reality that you are preparing to enter one of the toughest mission fields in the world—North America. North America is on the verge of the most stunning collapse of churches in the history of our country. Brothers and sisters, the Church of Jesus Christ is indestructible! However, the various organizational manifestations of it are very destructible. The United Methodist and the Presbyterian Church (USA) were just the first to set the pace, but there are hundreds on their way, most of them today's mega-churches. We are just one generation away from a mega-collapse. Nevertheless, and please hear me, North America is also, simultaneously, moving into one of the most dynamic phases of fresh church planting in our history. The last time a generation of Americans saw the pace of fresh church planting, which you will see, would have been the days of Francis Asbury. In the past, only two percent of our graduates went out to plant a new church. In this generation that needs to rise to at least 20 percent, and when you add those who need to do new church planting within existing structures and denominations, it will rise to over 50 percent. However, throughout this new phase, we will increasingly be occupying the margins, not the center of the culture. That means we have to reclaim our prophetic role. We also have to reclaim our role as evangelists and church planters, not just pastors and teachers.

This transition cannot be negotiated by a "business-as-usual" approach. This transition cannot be negotiated by a "pastor-as-comfortable-career-option" approach. This transition cannot be negotiated by a, "I'm going to spend my time preoccupied with

my salary, my pension plan and my parsonage” mentality. This transition cannot be negotiated by a “climb the denominational ladder” strategy. Those days must be relegated to the rear view mirror as we encounter the sunrise of this new day. We now occupy the rugged frontiers, not the comfortable couches of the heartland. God is calling you to be street lights, not sanctuary lights!

These are the days of **Perpetua** from Carthage who, although nursing a child, was willing to face the lions in the arena, rather than bow to the false idols of her world.

These are the days of **Athanasius**, the great Alexandrian bishop who saw the whole church embracing Arianism, and he stood up for God’s truth—Athanasius *contra mundum*, Athanasius against the world. Some of you will need to stand up and say lovingly to the church, “You’ve got it wrong, let’s go back to the text again!”

These are the days of **Augustine**: The whole empire was collapsing; Rome is sacked; and somebody has to write the *City of God*. May someone in this room write that text for our day!

These are the days of **Martin Luther** when the church has lost its way, lost its prophetic voice. In our day, the church has been swept down the stream of uncritical populism and positive thinking and niceness and “three-stories-and-a-joke.” This new generation cannot be reached that way. Luther had the courage to wade out against the current and declare, “Here I stand, I can do no other.” May God give some of you that kind prophetic courage.

These are the days of **Wesley** who preached himself out of every pulpit in England and, in the process, reminded us that “the world is our parish.” Here at Asbury Seminary, we are on a mission, and it is not a mission rooted in Nashville or New York. Because we have lifted up our eyes to the harvest, it’s a global mission.

In the midst of the *twitterization* of our sacred work, God will raise up men and women who are prepared to move beyond “quick, cheap, and easy.” This is not something you or I can orchestrate. It takes a renewed discovery of the call of God to something better: to be better readers of the Holy Scriptures, better reflectors on the true nature of worship, better proclaimers of the eternal gospel. We are those who have been called and summoned into

the presence of the Risen Christ and called into His service. We have been delivered out of the world, only to be sent back into it.

Augustine was happy chanting psalms in the monastery when the people of Hippo rushed upon him, picked him up on their shoulders, and shouted, “Episcopus, Episcopus, Our Bishop, Our Bishop.”

Calvin planned to spend only one night in smelly Geneva, when he was confronted by the steely eyes of Frenchman Gionne Farrell who said to Calvin, “stay with us in this work.”

John Wesley went unwillingly to that Moravian prayer chapel at Aldersgate; his heart was strangely warmed; and, soon, the whole world was set ablaze.

They were seized and summoned by God for a work which was much bigger than they were.

Christianity is not about fast, cheap and easy. Our DNA is actually on the side of the ledger, however unpopular. It is about **bloody sacrifice, costly kenosis**, and, praise God, **profound transformation**. On the anvil of Asbury Theological Seminary, you will learn that the most important work of your life cannot be achieved in a single lifetime. We are those who live in eschatological hope, caught between the “already” and the “not-yet.” We live in solidarity with our brothers and sisters who came before us and will follow after us. We are also looking for that city, whose maker and builder is God. We await the new creation and the consummation of the ages.

Amen.

About Dr. Timothy C. Tennent



Asbury Theological Seminary President Timothy C. Tennent took office on July 1, 2009 and was inaugurated in November of the same year.

He previously served 11 years as Professor of World Missions and Indian Studies at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary in South Hamilton, Mass. Prior to his work in Massachusetts, Dr. Tennent taught missions at Toccoa Falls College in Georgia, where he was honored as teacher of the year in 1995. He also teaches annually at the Luther W. New Jr. Theological College of Dehra Dun, India, where he has served as an adjunct professor since 1989. He has also ministered and taught in China, Thailand, Nigeria and Eastern Europe. Ordained in the United Methodist Church, he has pastored churches in Georgia, and preached regularly in churches throughout New England and across the country.

Dr. Tennent is the author of several books, including *Building Christianity on Indian Foundations*, (ISPCK, 2000); *Christianity at the Religious Roundtable*, (Baker Academic, 2002); and *Theology in the Context of*

World Christianity: How the Global Church is Influencing the Way We Think About and Discuss Theology, (Zondervan, 2007). He is the co-author of *Revitalizing Practice*, which is about challenges to theological education in North America (Peter Lang, 2008). Dr. Tennent is also the author of a missiology textbook entitled *Invitation to World Missions: A Missiology for the 21st Century*, which was published in 2010.

Dr. Tennent's wife Julie (Myers) is an accomplished organist. She graduated from Gordon-Conwell with the M.E.M. degree in 1984 and has a B.Mus. in Organ from Westminster College. They have two children, Jonathan and Bethany.

Education:

Dr. Tennent received his M.Div. in 1984 from Gordon-Conwell; the Th.M. in Ecumenics, with a focus on Islam from Princeton Theological Seminary; and did graduate work in linguistics (TESL) at the University of Georgia. He completed his Ph.D. in Non-western Christianity, with a focus on Hinduism and Indian Christianity in 1998 at the University of Edinburgh in Scotland. He is also one of four graduates from a new leadership development program. The mentor project in academic leadership was developed and supported by the Lexington Seminar (a Lily endowment).



Asbury Theological Seminary is a community called to prepare theologically educated, sanctified, Spirit-filled men and women to evangelize and to spread scriptural holiness throughout the world through the love of Jesus Christ, in the power of the Holy Spirit and to the glory of God the Father.

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