

Current Issue

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The contributions in this July 2026 issue of Global Missiology address, in one way or another, the apparently straightforward question, "Who is 'theology' for?" The article on contemporary practices and three book reviews are about theological training, the nature of theology, the formulators of theology, and the use of theology—all in today's changing contexts of worldwide Christian growth and ministry. A reframed, expanded form of the question above encapsulates this issue's contents: "Given today's undeniably changing religious landscape, who theologizes for whom?"

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Editorial

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Editorial

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J. Nelson Jennings

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So who is “theology” for?

Some readers—like my contextualized, analytical-editorial self—might instinctively react to that question with such grammatically outdated correctives as, “That question should read, ‘For whom does “theology” exist?’ or ‘For whom has the Church theologized?’” Some of us might also want the question to come across in a more “sophisticated” or “educated” manner than its plain, everyday style connotes. “Proper” grammar, “acceptable” sentence formation, and “advanced” vocabularies are important, are they not—including for presenting the Christian gospel, right?

I confess to liking as much as any other English speaker, sentimentally at least, the now archaic rule that Winston Churchill satirized in his alleged witticism, “Ending sentences with prepositions is something up with which I will not put.” I also prefer avoiding split infinitives, in order faithfully to follow (or “to follow faithfully,” not the abundantly more common and now natural-feeling “to faithfully follow”) strictly traditional grammar. Today’s mixing of objective- and subjective-case pronouns in everyday speech, especially the egregious beginning of a sentence by listing multiple subjects that start with the first-person pronoun *me* (“improperly” in the objective case), always draws my attention (not “Me and him...” but “He and I...”!). I confess to admiring eloquence and colorful imagery in language use, and I often wish I were more impressively expressive in how I spoke and wrote in my native tongue, English, as well as in other languages in which I function.

But back to that opening question: Who is “theology” for?

Remarkably, let’s say providentially in a way that our editorial team did not plan, all the contributions in this July 2026 issue of *Global Missiology* address, in one way or another, that apparently straightforward question. The Hemming-Handley article and three book reviews are about theological training, the nature of theology, the formulators of theology, and the use of theology—all in today’s changing contexts of worldwide Christian growth and ministry. A reframed, expanded form of the opening question encapsulates this issue’s contents: “Given today’s undeniably changing religious landscape, who theologizes for whom?”

The recognition that the Christian faith must deal with changing contexts spurred Martin Kähler’s early-twentieth-century dictum, “Mission is the mother of theology.” As David Bosch explained, Kähler observed that the early Eastern Mediterranean churches, including the New Testament writers, were “*forced* to theologize” because of their “missionary encounter with the world” (Bosch, 1991, p. 16, emphasis original). The New Testament was written in Koine Greek (as the Septuagint had been), and the Spirit-empowered followers of the ascended Jesus in the Hellenistic part of the world largely witnessed in Koine Greek, in order to communicate with the ubiquitous Greek speakers among whom they lived. (The New Testament also records such exceptions as Paul using Aramaic for certain Jewish audiences, e.g., in Jerusalem as recorded in Acts 21-22.) That communication required fresh conceptualizations and articulations, into Greek thought and language, of divine revelation and theology that for generations had been embedded in Hebrew and in Aramaic. An important example was those followers of Jesus who had come to

Antioch from Cyprus and Cyrene. Remarkably they preached to the Greeks and not just to Jews, and in so doing they preached Jesus as κύριος (Kurios) of the Roman Empire and of all people, not just the מָשִׁיחַ (Messiah) of Old Covenant Israel (Acts 11:19-20). Early-generation Christians in the Hellenistic world had to “theologize” in Greek to sort matters out for themselves and, arguably more importantly, to enable others around them to understand, articulate, and believe “divine words” about the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth.

Of course, early-generation Christians and their acquaintances in other cultural-linguistic worlds, such as Armenian and Syriac (whose equivalent terms for “theology” are the first two listed in this editorial’s title), also had to find terms for understanding, communicating, and processing the Christian gospel. All cross-cultural and cross-generational followers of Jesus, along with others observing and hearing them, have been “forced” to “contextualize,” to “un-scramble and re-scramble,” the Christian faith—Christian “theology”—for themselves (including in Hindi, Swahili, Arabic, Chinese, and Vietnamese; see again the editorial title). As evidenced by the Bible itself having been given in multiple languages and subsequently translated into countless other tongues, Christianity is an infinitely translatable faith. The triune God intends to be understood deeply and personally by all people.

The challenge that this issue’s contributions collectively tackle is that of bridging contextual gaps widened by the recurring, historical tendency of Christian traditions to unduly guard, freeze, and perpetuate particular expressions of “the faith that was once for all delivered to the saints” (Jude 3). That tendency resists God’s intention for all people to understand and trust him and his works in personal, transforming, and culturally appropriate ways. Foreign expressions of that faith—be they from earlier generations, different cultural-linguistic contexts, or both—can serve as barriers to personal, transforming, and culturally “at home” faith. How to deal constructively with “foreign ‘theology’” is the common thread that runs through this issue’s article and book reviews.

On the one hand, what has become a “foreign ‘theology’” for many throughout today’s world is, or at least *was*, a healthy expression of who God is and what he has done. The Hellenistic context within which the New Testament was given, and within which early Eastern Mediterranean Christian communities lived and witnessed, demanded Greek “words” and “studies”—λόγος (logos)—about deity—θεός (theos)—that meshed with Greek conceptual categories. Hebrew and Aramaic had different categories; neither had a separate concept or term equivalent to “theology,” for example. The development of Greek and Greco-Roman “theology” was a contextual necessity birthed from Christian mission, as Kähler, Bosch, and others have observed.

Many Western languages’ indebtedness to Greek and Latin, accompanied by several Western societies’ Greco-Roman conceptual heritage, make the continuing linguistic-intellectual use by much of Western Christianity of “theos-logos” only natural and appropriate. Furthermore, the Church’s fundamental unity and catholicity behoove other, “non-Western” branches of the Church, as well as contemporary so-called “postmodern” and “postsecular” (and otherwise newly shaped) Western Christian communities, to utilize “theology” and its many developments over the many generations since those early Eastern Mediterranean times.

On the other hand, no single expression of the Christian faith—including the “theology” that long ago was birthed within Greco-Roman circles out of missional engagement—should be tenaciously guarded, frozen, or perpetuated in ways that hinder ongoing missional engagement in new and different settings. Christian unity and catholicity are linked with diversity and

particularity. Moreover, the need for new and sometimes corrective expressions of “theology” (as articulated in or translated from English) is made even more acute in today’s historical pivot, at least by Christians and by others in many parts of the world, away from the often assumed, unconscious guardianship and imposition of tradition associated with the widespread cultural presence fostered by British and U.S. economic and military power.

Today’s missional need for fresh theological expressions and personal development is why Hemming and Handley commend to others the kind of competency-based theological education that has recently taken root in Kenya; the academic-only leadership training perpetuated in many Western-based models is insufficient for the kind of church leaders needed in today’s diverse and changing settings. That same need drives Steffen and Neu, as presented by Manokaran, to advocate a “character theology” that emphasizes God’s revelation through people’s lives more than just through concepts. Similarly, Gashute reviews a recent publication of African interpretations of the New Testament, facilitating direct missional engagements between the Scriptures and various African settings. What missional engagement needs in “post-Christendom” societies is an important focus of cultural apologetics, as Bishop explains.

So who is “theology” for? An important qualification at this point is that Hemming and Handley, in advocating holistic, competency-based theological training, do not therefore argue for *replacing* traditional intellectual theological education. They instead appeal for collaboration and mutual strengthening between models. Similarly, Kwame Bediako—perhaps more than any other scholar—championed the fundamental viability and “abiding” importance of everyday, “grassroots,” vernacular, and oral theological understandings and expressions. He thus urged “academic theology to be in touch with, to listen to, to share in, and to learn from, but never to replace” such “spontaneous ... theology which comes from where the faith lives” (Bediako, 2000, p. 17). At the same time, Bediako (including through his own example) did not therefore dismiss the ongoing role of inscribed and published intellectual theologizing. Acknowledging the leading role played by everyday theologians and their communities should not lead to removing stage lighting from those making academic contributions.

In an almost passing comment in his lengthy testimony to King Agrippa and other dignitaries, the Apostle Paul recounted how the risen Jesus had appeared to him: “I heard a voice saying to me in the Hebrew language [τῇ ἑβραϊδὶ διαλεκτῷ], ‘Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?’” (Acts 26:14). Scholars have examined the Greek phrase just listed and have thereby discussed exactly what language Jesus used with Paul, with Aramaic being the typical conclusion. In any case, Paul included his seemingly trivial, linguistic point to convey the monumental reality that the actual, risen Jesus of Nazareth used their shared colloquial, mother-tongue language in speaking personally to the Jewish, Aramaic-fluent Paul of Tarsus. Jesus wanted Paul to understand him, and Paul evangelistically wanted Agrippa to know how personally God interacts with all people (Acts 26:28-29).

“Words about deity,” “study of God and his works,” and equivalent descriptions—whether in societies with a Greco-Roman heritage or in societies whose conceptual-linguistic categories do not resonate as much with intellectualized Greco-Roman “theology”—are for everyone. While the risen Jesus gives spiritual teaching gifts to churches, he does so for all his people—because he “desires all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth” (I Tim. 2:4). God orchestrates his world so that all people “should seek God, and perhaps feel their way toward him and find him” (Acts 17:27). God has graciously spoken in the colloquial languages of Hebrew,

Aramaic, and Koine Greek. His Spirit has overseen the Bible's accelerated translations into the world's languages, whether orally or inscribed, so that all might understand and articulate who God is and what he has done, i.e., might "theologize" as followers of Jesus Christ. All human beings "theologize" in the broadest sense, even while articulating "Christian theology" per se is the Church's responsibility. Because "theology" is for everyone, a Christian openness to listen and learn others' thinking and languages should temper any well-intended but tight-fisted clutching and fossilizing of any theological tradition.

So who is "theology" for? "Theology" is for everyone bearing the *imago dei* / צֶלֶם אֱלֹהִים / εἰκόνα του Θεού / Աստծոն պատկեր / رُكُونُ اللَّهِ / ईश्वर की छवि / mfano wa Mungu / صورة الله / 神的形象 / hình ảnh của Thiên Chúa. Me and them think so. What about you?

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A Proven Model for Developing Biblically Competent, Christlike Leaders for Churches Worldwide

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Abstract

This article evaluates Competency-Based Theological Education (CBTE) through Re-Forma's outcomes-based model to address the global pastor training crisis. Drawing on 2025 qualitative research of 14 Kenyan facilitators, the study demonstrates how implementing Re-Forma's 37 Outcomes establishes a rigorous, contextually flexible standard for assessing competence for biblical ministry. The findings show that this mentor-driven approach integrates head, heart, and hands to foster Christlike character, counter prosperity theology, and unite independent "Roho" congregations. Additionally, this standard satisfies government registration criteria, presenting a scalable pathway to equip reliable, qualified global leaders.

Keywords: Christlike leadership development, Competency-Based Theological Education (CBTE), Kenyan context, non-formal theological education, Re-Forma Outcomes

Introduction

Across many parts of Africa, it is not uncommon on any given Sunday for pastors to step into the pulpit and preach with little or no formal theological education (Hemming, 2026). This reality is vividly seen in the heart of Kenya, on the shores of Lake Victoria, where a humble "Roho" (Swahili for "Spirit") church—one of the numerous so-called African Independent Churches often shunned by mainstream denominations—stands under the leadership of Father Peter. For two decades, Father Peter led his people faithfully, yet without formal theological education or government recognition. His congregation, often seen as "too African" by traditional institutions, remained vulnerable to both regulatory pressure and doctrinal instability.



(left to right) Father Peter Orono, Bishop James Achola (facilitator), Paul Hemming (Re-Forma Director for Africa), Cardinal Joel Odero, and Maggie Gichuki (Re-Forma National Coordinator) in front of New Alfa Church, Kisumu

In such “Roho” churches, leaders are among those most in need of theological training. They are often excluded from mainstream programmes and left without the credentials needed to secure their congregations’ legitimacy. Through Re-Forma’s outcomes-based programme (Re-Forma, 2026a), Father Peter and ten of his leaders graduated with certificates that carried credibility—enough to register their church with the Kenyan government. This breakthrough brought both legal protection and newfound doctrinal stability.

The impact did not stop at mere administrative success. Father Peter’s ministry multiplied, new congregations were established, and servant leadership flourished. Women were empowered to lead and preach, and the congregation learned to discern truth from error. In a context marked by regulatory pressure, the so-called “prosperity gospel,” abuse of spiritual authority, false teaching, and barriers to ministry training, Re-Forma’s outcomes-based model is reshaping ministry from the ground up. This story of one Roho church’s transformation serves as an entry point into the broader themes of this article.

Yet Father Peter’s story is not unique. It represents a microcosm of a much larger challenge: the global leadership gap in churches around the world. Studies estimate that millions of pastors worldwide serve without adequate training, leaving congregations vulnerable and ministries under-resourced. According to the Center for the Study of Global Christianity, while there are approximately five million Christian clergy worldwide, only about 5% possess formal theological training (Center for the Study of Global Christianity, 2024). Michael Ortiz, Executive Director of the International Council for Evangelical Theological Education (ICETE), observes that this lack of training coincides with a colossal imbalance: while some Western nations have one trained pastor for every few hundred people, parts of the Majority World have only one for every 450,000 (Ortiz, 2023). This disparity has been famously illustrated by Rev. Steven Loots, founder of Harvesters Ministries, who notes that church planting is currently moving at the speed of a “bullet train,” while leadership development follows on a “bicycle” (Handley, 2022). The 2024 Lausanne Congress, held in Seoul-Incheon, South Korea, identified this disparity as one of the most urgent gaps facing the global church, calling for Christlike leaders whose integrity matches their competence (Lausanne Movement, 2024b).

The urgency of this challenge is difficult to overstate. Across much of the Majority World, the growth of the Church has far outpaced the capacity to develop well-equipped leaders. Thousands of pastors and ministry leaders faithfully serve growing congregations with little or no opportunity for sustained biblical and theological training. While residential seminaries remain indispensable for many, they alone cannot meet either the scale or the diversity of today’s leadership development needs. This reality calls for complementary approaches that are both biblically faithful and contextually accessible, enabling leaders to be equipped where they live and serve while remaining deeply engaged in the life and mission of the local church.

Against this backdrop, the experience of Re-Forma—a ministry that has established the first-ever, global standard for non-formal, biblical ministry—in Kenya should be understood within a much broader conversation taking place across global theological education. As the centre of Christianity continues to shift toward the Majority World, there is growing recognition that no single educational model can adequately meet the scale and diversity of leadership development needs. Rather than asking which model is best, the more strategic question is how formal, non-formal, and informal approaches can complement one another in equipping the next generation of biblically competent, Christlike leaders (Handley, 2026). Increasingly, theological educators are

exploring how these approaches can work together, each contributing unique strengths to leadership formation. Recent conversations within ICETE and related global networks reflect this growing consensus, emphasising collaboration rather than competition between educational models. The Re-Forma experience in Kenya offers one practical example of how this collaborative vision can be implemented in a specific context while remaining deeply rooted in biblical formation, contextual relevance, and ministry effectiveness. The Kenyan experience presented here is not intended as a universal template, but as a contextual case study that illustrates how these principles can be applied within one Majority World setting.

The biblical mandate for leaders, particularly in 2 Timothy 2, underscores the dual emphasis on Christlike character and ministry competence. This article explores how Re-Forma's outcomes-based programme is deeply rooted within a Competency-Based Theological Education (CBTE) framework, ensuring that ministry leaders are not only theologically equipped but also growing as Christlike leaders and shepherds of their congregations. In addition, the article's underlying research offers a lens through which we can understand how CBTE principles are realised in diverse ministry settings. By drawing on a detailed case study of Re-Forma's training efforts in Kenya, the article explores how the holistic goals of CBTE—unifying theological knowledge with character and competence—are being realised in real-world ministry contexts.

The Biblical Basis: Reclaiming the Apostolic Model for Formation

Addressing the contemporary leadership gap, requires a recovery of the biblical framework for ministerial formation. This article contends that 2 Timothy 2 provides this framework, offering perhaps the most explicit mandate and model for ministry training in the New Testament. Written as a “passing of the torch” from the Apostle Paul to his protégé Timothy, the chapter functions as a manual for ensuring the continuity of the gospel through the intentional formation of its leaders. Paul's primary concern here is not merely the survival of a message but the formation of the minister. He presents a blueprint for a holistic ministerial identity—one where the integrity of the leader is the primary safeguard for the truth they proclaim.

This apostolic pattern is not a Pauline innovation but a direct continuation of the apprenticeship of the Twelve. As recorded in Mark 3:14, Jesus appointed the Apostles “that they might be with him and that he might send them out to preach.” This prototypical model formed their *head* through teaching, their *heart* by walking together daily, and their *hands* through real-world ministry practice. Paul's instruction to Timothy simply codifies this holistic apprenticeship into a reproducible manual, ensuring that ministerial formation remains relational, observable, and multiplicative.

This pattern is anchored in the succession of entrustment described in 2 Timothy 2:2. Paul instructs Timothy to entrust the gospel to “reliable (*pistos*) people who will also be qualified (*hikanoi*) to teach others.” This verse outlines an “apostolic succession” of truth, where the gospel is preserved through the quality of the successors. An exegetical examination of these terms reveals them to be the essential poles of a mature minister of Christ. *Pistos* (reliability) represents the “heart” orientation: a Christlike character tested and found faithful in the service of the gospel. In the Pastoral Epistles, this reliability refers to a faithfulness that is both a gift of grace and a requirement for service. Such faithfulness is inextricably linked to *hikanoi*, the functional “competence” or “ability” required for the task. Together, *pistos* and *hikanoi* form the biblical basis for the triad of formation: head (biblical knowledge), heart (Christlike character), and hands (ministry skill).

The broader context of the chapter demonstrates that ministry competence is a lived reality developed in ministry experience. Paul's metaphors of the soldier, the athlete, and the farmer (vv. 3–6) illustrate that character and competence are developed through discipline, adherence to the requirements of the calling, and hardworking patience. Philip Towner points out that in these verses there is a “shift in the didactic strategy from an emphasis on models to instruction with maxims and specific commands,” emphasising that these metaphors underscore the rigorous, integrated nature of the ministerial calling (Towner, 2006). These images remind the reader that ministry is a demanding labour requiring an integrated life of discipline. They represent a holistic ministerial identity where the leader's *heart* provides the essential foundation for their *head* and *hands* to remain effective in service.

Furthermore, Paul's exhortation to “correctly handle the word of truth” (v. 15) while avoiding “godless chatter” (v. 16) confirms that biblical knowledge serves as a moral guardrail. The “workman who does not need to be ashamed” is one whose academic head and ethical heart are in alignment. Paul's vision culminates in the “vessel for honour” (v. 21)—one who is cleansed, useful to the Master, and prepared for every good work.

This biblical vision of integrated formation—where character (*pistos*) undergirds competence (*hikanoi*)—directly informs the Lausanne Movement call for more biblically formed leaders at Seoul 2024. The Congress and its Seoul Statement emphasised that Christlike leaders are formed not through information transfer alone but through relational discipleship and accountable ministry practice, mirroring Paul's charge to Timothy (Lausanne Movement, 2024a). The critical insight from this biblical foundation is the formational unity of *pistos* and *hikanoi*. In the apostolic model, character and competence were never intended to be developed in isolation. Reclaiming these priorities requires a move toward a system that treats Christlike character and biblical skill as the inseparable evidence of ministerial integrity. By reuniting what has often been separated in modern education, the Church can develop leaders who possess the competence required to navigate the challenges of ministry around the world.

Personal Mentoring: How CBTE Facilitates Holistic Formation

If the apostolic model focuses on the integrated dimensions of ministry training—*head*, *heart*, and *hands*—then the method of formation must move beyond the passivity of traditional “information transfer.” The primary strength of Competency-Based Theological Education (CBTE) is its ability to facilitate this integrated leadership growth through a process of mentoring based on appropriate competencies. Stuart Sheehan notes that this “redemptive approach” empowers new leaders by removing traditional barriers of proximity, time, and academic qualification, relocating the learning to the student's own context (Sheehan, 2023).

CBTE represents a fundamental reimagining of ministerial preparation and indeed a strategic necessity for the global mission (Barron, 2024). The “new tools” of CBTE provide a way to offer rigorous training outside traditional structures, while others argue that this competency paradigm is uniquely suited for intercultural contexts because it prioritises demonstrated ministry outcomes over Western academic inputs (Naylor et al., 2024). Furthermore, the analysis of micro-credentials provides a necessary pragmatic toolkit for how these outcomes can be validated across disparate ministry sectors (Barron, 2024). The research underpinning this article builds upon these discussions by demonstrating that CBTE shifts the focus from accumulated “seat time” in a classroom to the demonstrated mastery of these three dimensions—*head*, *heart*, and *hands*—within a relational context.

The effectiveness of the CBTE model lies in the active involvement of personal mentors facilitating a learning process, whereby the learner develops mastery in holistic ministry competencies. Anderson and Henson define CBTE as an approach where formation is “shaped by the recognition that the act of knowing requires the integration of content, character, and craft, and evaluated in the context of team-based mentoring” (Anderson & Henson, 2024). In traditional academic settings, the *head* is often developed in isolation on a campus, while the *heart* and *hands* are left to be developed later. CBTE collapses this distance by utilising backward design: identifying the appropriate competencies required for the relevant ministry and embedding the learning process directly within the life of the local church through a mentor-protégé relationship.

A further strength of the CBTE approach is that quality assurance is embedded within the formation process itself rather than treated as a separate evaluative exercise. Clearly defined competencies, intentional facilitator mentoring, and demonstration-based assessment work together to ensure that learners are evaluated not simply on knowledge acquired but on demonstrated growth in biblical understanding, ministry competence, and Christlike character. In this way, assessment becomes an integral part of formation rather than merely a measure of academic achievement.

One of the distinctive strengths of CBTE is not simply its holistic approach to formation, but its ability to preserve fidelity to desired ministry outcomes while allowing contextual flexibility in how those outcomes are achieved and assessed. The competencies themselves provide a stable framework for biblical and ministry formation, while facilitators retain the freedom to adapt learning activities, mentoring relationships, and assessment methods to the realities of their local context. This combination of theological integrity and contextual adaptability makes the model particularly well suited for leadership development across diverse cultural settings.

In this mentoring framework, formation is achieved through three distinct areas of effectiveness:

- **Real-time observation of the *heart*:** Because the student remains in their ministry context, the facilitator—acting as a personal mentor—does not have to guess at the learner's character. They observe it in the way the learner handles conflict, treats their family, and manages church resources. Learner progression is marked by the observable demonstration of integrated knowing rather than by time, input, or curricular stages (Anderson & Henson, 2024). Such integrated competencies can only be verified in a demonstration-based, rather than a time-based, model.
- **Contextual relevance for the *hands*:** Mentoring allows ministry skills to be developed in the specific environment where the leader will serve. This arrangement removes the “translation gap” often found when students return from a distant seminary and struggle to apply abstract concepts to local realities.
- **Accountability for the *head*:** In a mentoring model, biblical knowledge is not acquired for its own sake but is immediately applied to the challenges of ministry and leadership. This observed application creates a feedback loop where the Word of Truth is “correctly handled” (2 Tim 2:15) because it is being tested in ministry (or ministry-simulated environments) alongside a mentor.

Such mentoring-driven formation echoes the Lausanne Congress's so-called GAP 18 ("Developing Leaders of Character") emphasis on structured, relational programmes that pair emerging leaders with mentors for character development, skill-building, and mutual accountability (Lausanne Movement, 2024c). By keeping learning in the local church context, CBTE operationalises Lausanne's vision of Christlike leaders who are formed in ministry rather than extracted from it.

By reuniting these *head-heart-hands* dimensions through appropriately identified competencies, CBTE provides a streamlined and biblically faithful pathway for the succession of ministry entrustment. It ensures that the formation of the minister remains holistic, verifying that the leader who emerges from the training has achieved the identified ministry readiness—possessing both the *pistos* and *hikanoi* required for their ministry context.

Implementing the Model: Kairos, Re-Forma, and the Global CBTE Movement

Steve Hardy observes that the future of theological education hinges on its ability to be both accessible and accountable—ensuring “quality” even in non-formal settings (Hardy, 2022). To ensure both accessibility and accountability, the CBTE movement has developed delivery systems that maintain accountability through relational and institutional guardrails. These measures are visible in both the formal academic sector, through institutions like Kairos University, and the non-formal sector, primarily through Re-Forma.

In the formal sector, Kairos University has pioneered a model that moves away from a fixed curriculum toward a student-centred approach driven by a mentor team. Here, identified ministry readiness is achieved by placing the student at the centre of a three-person team comprising a faculty member, a vocational mentor, and a personal mentor. Progression is not determined by credit hours but by the team's collective verification of mastery in holistic competencies, guided by proficiency indicators.

On the non-formal side, Re-Forma provides a global standard specifically designed for the “untrained millions” who may never have access to formal degree programmes. The Re-Forma model is built upon 37 Outcomes that define the essential “*head, heart, and hands*” of a minister (Re-Forma, 2020; Hemming, 2024). The 37 Outcomes are organised into four ministry-related categories; namely, Leading like Jesus, Handling the Word, Reaching and Making Disciples, and Shepherding God's People (Re-Forma, 2026b). The implementation of Re-Forma relies on three primary mechanisms of accountability to ensure that these outcomes are more than a mere checklist.

First, the model is implemented through the facilitator. Unlike the broader team approach of Kairos, Re-Forma relies on the facilitator to serve as the primary personal mentor to a local training group. This relational proximity is the engine of quality control; the facilitator verifies not just biblical knowledge but also the demonstration of Christlike character and ministry skills within the learner's local context. Because the facilitator is usually a local church leader, the assessment is based on long-term observation rather than a single examination.

Crucially, this assessment is an ongoing, formative process rather than a summative test. For each of the 37 Outcomes, the learner must provide evidence of mastery, which the facilitator evaluates through oral interviews, written reports, observed ministry practice, and feedback from the local congregation. To equip facilitators, and to standardise assessment globally, Re-Forma

provides assessment guidelines. In this way, assessment is strengthened by being based on objective standards and implemented in the context of relationship.

Second, Re-Forma utilises a decentralised verification system. To maintain the integrity of the standard across diverse global contexts, local groups are overseen by National Coordinators. These coordinators (along with office staff) provide a layer of external accountability by conducting “spot-check” phone calls with the students before any certificates are issued.

Third, the World Evangelical Alliance (WEA) provides a global endorsement that acts as a benchmark for credibility. As the underlying research notes, this global standard allows local, non-formal training to gain a level of institutional validity previously available only to those within the formal seminary system.

By integrating these mechanisms, Re-Forma ensures that quality is measured by the actual life and competence of the minister. These built-in relational and institutional guardrails fulfill the Lausanne call for collaborative, verifiable pathways that equip “reliable and qualified” leaders who can serve within diverse global contexts.

The Kenyan Story: Evidence of Holistic Transformation

To evaluate the effectiveness of the Re-Forma model, a series of in-depth qualitative interviews was conducted in 2025. The study focused on 14 facilitators stationed primarily in the bustling urban hub of Nairobi and the vibrant communities surrounding Kisumu, on the shores of Lake Victoria. These Kenyan training groups were chosen because they represent the pulse of the global leadership gap—where the rapid growth of the Church often outpaces the availability of formal training. The research was designed to be deeply communal: before the interviews, facilitators first engaged in their own “listening tours” with their students, as well as with the students' families, church members, and local communities. These diverse interviews ensured the data was not merely a self-report from a student, but a rich tapestry of testimonies reflecting tangible change in the home and ministry environment.

What makes the Kenyan experience particularly significant is that the observations shared by participants were not based solely on programme intentions but are supported by qualitative research with facilitators directly involved in the training process. Participants consistently described growth across the integrated dimensions of biblical understanding, ministry practice, and Christlike character, while also pointing to observable changes within their churches and communities. Rather than presenting isolated success stories, the findings suggest that holistic formation can be intentionally cultivated and recognised within local ministry contexts.

The empirical outcomes in Kenya demonstrate a practical outworking of Lausanne’s GAP 18 objectives: character formation that moves beyond religious performance into the home and community, doctrinal clarity that counters syncretism and prosperity theology, and multiplied leadership that breaks down denominational walls. By producing observable Christ-like maturity alongside ministry competence, the Re-Forma model offers churches and leadership-training ministries around the world a scalable pathway toward the “Christlike leaders for every church and sector” that Lausanne envisions.

Through the semi-structured interviews mentioned above, a “saturation point” was reached in the feedback and testimonies being shared, offering compelling evidence of transformation. By transcribing and coding the various narratives that were obtained, the researcher was able to move

beyond anecdotal evidence to identifying a clear, thematic roadmap of change. This rigorous thematic analysis revealed that the transformation was not isolated; it was a predictable outcome of integrating *head*, *heart*, and *hands*.

The student body concerning whom the interviews were conducted represented a broad and varied demographic. Student training groups typically ranged from 20 to 30 students, though several facilitators trained over 200 learners across multiple cycles. Participants spanned from late teens to mid-fifties, with an aggregated gender balance of 62% men and 38% women. Crucially, over 70% of the students were already serving as pastors or lay leaders, confirming the high demand for validation among the undertrained. Attrition of students, going through the outcomes-based programme, was remarkably low at only 8%, despite challenges in technology and distance. Facilitators adapted to varying literacy levels through oral methods, often instructing in Kiswahili or vernaculars like Luo, Kikuyu, and Kalenjin.

Two findings surprised the researcher most during the fieldwork. First, groups demonstrated a sophisticated ability to contextualise the Outcomes without altering their intent. For example, they reframed biblical symbols to correct syncretistic beliefs, clarifying that a dove represents the Holy Spirit rather than being the Spirit itself. Second was the seamless integration of the *head*, *heart*, and *hands* dimensions, where learners lived out the Bible's teaching. The research revealed an impact in several spheres:

- **The Personal Sphere: Character and Relational Maturity:**

The primary shift in this sphere was a development of Christlike character that moved beyond religious performance into the home. Facilitators documented pastors reconciling with wives after years of separation. One facilitator remarked: "The fruit of the Spirit outcome shook people... they saw outcomes requiring character, not just knowledge." This observation was verified by a spouse who observed: "He was the one doing the dishes—it's not what he usually does." Relational maturity was further evidenced in conflict resolution: "Initially, they would run away from conflict, but now they use the word of God to bring people together."

- **The Ministerial Sphere: Doctrinal Clarity and Administrative Integrity:**

Beyond the impact of improved handling of the Word, the Re-Forma training had forced a renunciation of false teachings. Pastors moved from random scripture selection to expository preaching, with one facilitator noting: "Members were commenting that 'our pastor has changed, the way he is teaching us and handling the Bible is quite different'—they could see the depth and the flow in the sermons." This shift directly countered "prosperity gospel" rhetoric. Furthermore, the *hands* dimension triggered a breakthrough in administrative integrity; pastors began keeping transparent records and finances. As one facilitator explained: "Requiring participants to demonstrate [administrative competence] really drove the point home."

- **The Ecclesiastical and Communal Spheres: Unity and Empowerment**

The CBTE training shifted churches from "one-man shows" to "multiplied leadership." In one church, a youth gathering grew from 20 to over 160 attendees because the leader was finally equipped. One facilitator observed: "The training broke down denominational walls... rival ministries began forming fellowships." This ecclesiastical shift also saw the

empowerment of women and children. The impact extended into the community through social action, such as caring for widows and orphans, and in one session over 70 people came to faith during an hour of practical fieldwork.

The Kenyan experience also demonstrates that faithful implementation does not require rigid uniformity. While the desired competencies remain constant, facilitators regularly adapted learning activities and assessment practices to local languages, educational backgrounds, ministry settings, and available resources without compromising the intended outcomes. This balance between fidelity to core competencies and flexibility in contextual implementation helps explain why Re-Forma's programme has proven both credible and accessible across diverse ministry environments.

The evidence from Kenya suggests that holistic leader formation produces effects that extend well beyond individual participants. As leaders grow in biblical competence, ministry effectiveness, and Christlike character, the benefits are reflected in healthier congregations, stronger local leadership, and a more credible Christian witness within surrounding communities. While this case study is rooted in one East African context, it illustrates how intentional, holistic formation can contribute to the strengthening of the Church more broadly.

Discussion and Implications: A Path Forward for the Global Church

The empirical findings from Kenya demonstrate that the perceived “gap” between academic knowledge and ministerial character is not an inevitability, but a result of a pedagogical disconnect. Ashish Chrispal asks, “Which way for theological education?” in arguing that the future depends on models that bridge the gap between academic theory and ecclesial practice (Chrispal, 2022). When training is relocated to the crucible of the local church and anchored in appropriately identified competencies and mentoring, the result is a well-rounded ministry readiness.

The first implication of the Kenyan case study concerns the Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) (Hemming, 2026). For too long, the theological academy has operated as a closed system. However, the success of the Re-Forma model suggests that appropriately identified competencies can serve as a universal benchmark. A pastor's demonstrated mastery of the 37 Outcomes—verified by a facilitator-mentor—should serve as a legitimate bridge to further formal education. This “stackable” approach allows a leader to move from non-formal validation to formal degrees without repeating the formation they have already mastered in the “marketplace” of ministry.

Second, the Kenyan study highlights the potential for alignment with Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) standards (Hemming, 2026). By framing ministry training through the lens of “vocation” and “competence,” churches can utilise national educational frameworks to gain broader social and legal credibility. The practical value of gaining such credibility was clearly evidenced in the Kenyan research, where the Roho church pastor mentioned earlier, Father Peter, reported that his church registration was officially approved by the Registrar of Societies after he presented his Re-Forma certificate. Far from being an isolated stroke of fortune, the experience of leaders like Father Peter demonstrates that integrating non-formal CBTE models with national standards offers a repeatable, legally protected pathway for thousands of independent congregations facing regulatory scrutiny.

Conclusion

Ultimately, the crisis of the “untrained millions” requires more than the expansion of information transfer; it demands a recovery of the apostolic model of formation. As the 2024 Lausanne Congress underscored in its GAP 18 on “Developing Leaders of Character,” the future of the global church depends on leaders whose integrity matches their competence (Lausanne Movement, 2024c). This vision calls for mentoring-driven pathways that unite Christlike character with ministry skills.

The Kenyan case study demonstrates that the vision is not theoretical but lived reality. By reuniting *head, heart, and hands*, pastors and facilitators are embodying observable transformation—families reconciled, prosperity teaching renounced, doctrinal clarity deepened, servant leadership multiplied, and churches strengthened. These outcomes show that CBTE is not merely a theoretical model but a proven one, producing leaders who are demonstrably “reliable and qualified” (2 Tim 2:2).

Kenya provides a microcosm of the wider challenge: rapid growth, multilingual ministry, bivocational pastors, and denominational fragmentation. At the same time, Kenya provides a wider solution. Recognition pathways such as RPL, TVET, and Registrar of Societies approvals show that non-formal CBTE models can bridge into formal systems, securing both institutional credibility and ministry effectiveness.

For the “bicycle” of leadership development to catch up with the “bullet train” of church-planting, churches and leadership-training ministries around the world must embrace proven, contextualised CBTE models. A more widespread operationalising of the apostolic mandate for leadership training through mentoring, outcomes, and accountability will ensure that the next generation of leaders will be not only informed but truly formed: biblically competent, Christlike in character, and ready to shepherd the people of God into the future.

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Call for Papers:

Christian Unity amid Domestic and International Divisions

For Publication in *Global Missiology*, www.globalmissiology.org, April 2027

The history of the Church is full of contentious issues. Our day seems no different. The strains run both internally and externally, and they are true for local churches as well as churches and denominations with broader identities, be they national or even international. Mission agencies and missionary orders—including missionaries, administrators, and supporters—face the same intense divisions wherever they are serving.

Shifts in geopolitics contribute to the divisiveness. Among Christians many are appalled, while others approve, as longstanding international alliances frazzle. Similarly, there are different Christian reactions to various military conflicts which often are characterized by unbalanced levels of armaments and of human suffering. Christians' feelings about immigration issues fall on vastly different points on a spectrum that ranks justice, legality, economics, and compassion (not to mention fear and prejudice). How Christians should relate to changing sexual values and other social and cultural issues that often morph into political battles over the future of a country or even of “Christian civilization” can also be divisive.

How is Christian unity affected by these tensions among individual Christians, churches, and mission organizations? How is Christian mission affected? Jesus prayed for his followers that God the Father would keep them one as the Father and the Son are one (John 17), and the historic creeds affirm that the Church is one. The April 2027 issue of *Global Missiology* will wrestle with these multifaceted dilemmas and questions.

The Editorial Team thus invites submissions related to this theme issue on “Christian Witness amid Political Divisions.” Manuscripts solely devoted to arguing for or against certain political positions are not the goal. Rather, the following types of topics, especially as addressed by case studies, are welcome:

- What is Christian unity, to which all Christians are called by Jesus and the creeds, and what does such unity look like?
- What are historical examples of how political divisions among Christians were handled?
- How are people outside Christian circles affected by Christian disunity over political matters? Put differently, how important is Christian unity for gospel witness?
- What issues underlie “proof-texting” the Bible for political positions?
- What issues underlie how Old Testament examples are applied differently to today's issues?
- How should the Church universal and/or local congregations address the divisive issues of our day? What should be the process of discernment for reaching a position and for deciding if and when a public stance should be taken?
- How is Christian unity to be preserved or restored without becoming a cover for sin and/or injustice?

- What role does theology play in preserving or restoring Christian unity? What theological gaps exist in our day?
- How might church and mission leaders pastorally address political divisions among members?
- How might expatriate missionaries address political divisions among indigenous Christians?

Proposed titles with approximately 100-word abstracts are due August 31, 2026. Full manuscripts of approved paper proposals will be due November 30, 2026. Manuscript guidelines, including a template for formatting, can be found on the *Global Missiology* website at:

<http://ojs.globalmissiology.org/index.php/english/about/submissions#authorGuidelines>

Please address all submissions and questions to globalmissiologyenglish@gmail.com.

Book Review

Tom Steffen and Ray Neu, *Character Theology: Engaging God through His Cast of Characters*

Reviewed by J. N. Manokaran

Published in *Global Missiology*, www.globalmissiology.org, July 2026

Steffen, Tom and Ray Neu (2024). *Character Theology: Engaging God through His Cast of Characters*. Pickwick Publications, ISBN: 9781666778571 (paperback), \$40.00; ISBN: 9781666778571 (hardcover), \$60.00, pp. 312; ISBN: 9781666778595 (ebook) \$40.00.

Authors Tom Steffen and Ray Neu, in their book *Character Theology: Engaging God through His Cast of Characters*, call for a relational, narrative, and participatory way of doing theology. The systematic theology developed by Western Christendom comprises abstract propositions that neglect God's revelation through the lives, voices, conflicts, struggles, sufferings, and journeys of the characters. God's revelation is in fact through characters in the biblical stories, hence theology cannot be separated from those stories. Furthermore, the biblical characters in the Scriptures mirror the stories of the readers.

Character Theology Defined

Character theology is caught experimentally, rather than thought rationally. Character theology is a relational theology that compellingly connects all cultures and religions. God appointed characters as storytelling emissaries to help others understand God and his salvific history, and to experience a relationship with him. God's revelation relies on earthly, concrete, biblical characters to frame, enliven, and demonstrate divine abstract truths and ethics. Stories form and reform our worldview. "Character theology, composed of a cast of characters who represent universal human experience, serves as the mother of meaning, meditation, modeling, modification, and memory" (29).

Character theology consists of Come and see; Taste and see; Figure it out. Biblical characters represent universal human experience and serve as the mother of meaning, meditation, modeling, modification, and memory. Stories provide a concrete basis, whether written, aural, or visual. The divine author of the Bible stories wrote for a purpose. "Writers are word shepherds. Storytellers are character shepherds" (34). The Bible is not a quiet printed text; rather, it is a speaking printed text. The goal of Bible engagement is to faithfully transfer the written text to the table of one's heart. Narrative or story is a fundamental instrument of the heart.

"Character theology offers choices between characters who offer the futility of foolishness, the well of wisdom, and everything between. Characters forge character" (55). Character theology has a unique way of arresting and retaining people's attention, making us wonder. Character theology encourages an amateur army of foot soldiers to interpret the Bible stories. Character theology extends and enhances existing theologies. Character theology provides an interpretive lens, providing a fuller, sharper vision of the glories of God.

Overall, *Character Theology* is a stimulating, creative, and deeply challenging contribution to contemporary theological reflection. It calls readers back to Scripture as drama, witness, and encounter, urging them to pay closer attention to the persons through whom God's truth is

disclosed. The result is a work that is academically suggestive, spiritually enriching, and practically relevant for teaching, preaching, discipleship, and mission.

Big Forgot and Fatal Flaw

According to the authors, orality is the “big forgot” and the absence of voices is the fatal flaw in most hermeneutic models. Stories are forgotten, and God is reduced to a subject in a seminary.

Ethno-theology

Is Systematic Theology the West’s ethno-theology? The Reformation endeavor was to relate Scripture to tradition. “For the Enlightenment, it was how to relate Scripture to reason. For today, the urgent question becomes, how do we relate Scripture to authority and experience?” (25).

Five Elements

Character theology needs five elements: stories, characters, orality, Oral hermeneutics, and character-centric questions.

Stories

Like honey attracts ants, stories attract people. In fact, stories create an insatiable hunger for more stories. Of course, stories take time to tell, but they percolate and perpetuate in the listener’s mind. Humans are image-making and image-using creatures. When people hear stories, they view them in the theatre of their minds. The invisible becomes visible; past events become present experiences. A story lingers in minds, resulting in awe, amazement, and anticipation. “The integration of symbols, stories, and rituals continues to shape and reshape one’s worldview” (42). Stories increase and perpetuate memory. “Stories show rather than tell, enact rather than explain, illuminate rather than spell out, demonstrate rather than define, embody rather than conceptualize, encounter rather than detail, exhibit rather than exhort, suggest rather than state” (42). Stories refuse to become history and easily become contemporary. “The Bible is replete with stories, comprised of some eight hundred major stories plus myriads of mini stories found in the Psalms, songs, Proverbs, and elsewhere” (44). The unified sacred story centers on Jesus Christ, the Perfect Person and Chief Character. Narrative is embedded in theology, rather than theology embedded in a narrative. Hence, Christ’s Character drives theology. Story is important because “The Holy Spirit loves beauty, teasing mystery, built-in ambiguity, creating emotive fascination, contradiction, wonder, discovery” (50-51). The Holy Spirit is the grand interpreter. Hermeneutics is never culture-free, nor is Bible interpretation.

Characters

Modern theology is dependent on de-dramatized propositions, statements about God, taken out of context. “A character is a person, spirit, or personified entity that advances or surrounds a conflict” (67). The Chief Character is the Lord Jesus Christ, and the Grand Interpreter is the Holy Spirit. Steffen and Neu highlight pivotal characters who exhibit a kaleidoscope of faults, failures, and feats. Characters are compared and contrasted as some become heroes and some become villains, and others are flat characters who tend to remain in the background. “Mystery, unpredictability, silence, tension, conflict, confusion, starts and stops, crises, catharses, conundrums developed in the plotline all create curiosity” (73).

Character-centered thinkers read characters and discern characters. “Relationally based character thinking goes beyond rationally based critical thinking by including emotions, life experience, and spirituality” (77). Character thinking is as complex as critical thinking. The Bible has a collection of characters sovereignly selected and sequenced within the Story. Characters centralize and consolidate as a story.

All interpretations are a risk. Only Jesus interpreted the Hebrew Bible flawlessly. Characters carry concepts and are involved in conversations, conduct, and commitment. Concepts require characters to dance together. Truth requires characters, and characters require truth.

Orality

Unlike knowing, learning requires listening. No writing is found in the Garden of Eden. The Ten Commandments were spoken before being written. Just as text can be written or spoken, so the spoken can be inaudible or audible. Script requires speech, and speech benefits from script. Oral to manuscript; manuscript to print; print to silent print; silent print to digital. Literacy has blinded many to the oral features of Scripture. The Spoken Word influenced the Written Word. Storytellers use tone, volume, pace, and gestures. Scripture is speech-sourced writings. Written scripts are living, speaking scripts. Storytellers are text proclaimer-performers. A story does not have a unifying topic, but a unifying action. Orality connects not just people through stories, but hearts and places as well. The oral does not die, but its authority is subordinate to that of the written text. God spoke the first word, and he will speak the last word, and he always speaks in between. “Scripture was revealed, received, recorded, rehearsed, and relayed to others through oral-aural means” (122). Children learn orally by listening, observing, and mimicking the multiple sounds and sights, among others, that surround them. Orality is based on relationships, with discussion and dialogue (voice and sound). Because of Postmodernism, orality became a comeback kid. Orality plus digital and virtual is the new norm.

Oral Hermeneutics

People learn how to underline and circle, if they cannot read. Interpreting requires telling and listening. Bible study is teaching, while Bible discussion is participatory and oral-oriented. “Using the role of facilitator along with character-centric questions, spiritual-gifted teachers can turn bible studies into fruitful, memorable, communal bible discussions” (141). Philosophy and science (including words, syntax, grammar) were the basis for hermeneutics in the era of the Enlightenment. In the Information Age, mechanical, digital, and virtual AI have become the tools. Enlightenment resulted in the denarrativization of the Bible. Stories are not designed for one-liners. Authors ask a valid question: “Do movie goers anxiously await the first conversation so they can begin to analyze the grammar to determine the movie’s meaning?” (148). It is possible to control information, but one cannot control mystery. The Bible is not just a code book, but a case book.

“Christianity is a way of life—an imaginative, emotional, rational way of life—based first and foremost on a relational story driven by concrete characters rather than a rational collection of theological truths” (132). Interpreting stories is more understandable than philosophizing about abstract concepts. Oralists prefer modelling over principles. See and feel lived truth. In the Ladder of abstraction, the lower rungs represent the concrete, ascending to the top abstract rungs. Bible communicators find themselves fixated on the top rungs of the ladder. Reason is the organ of truth, but imagination is the organ of meaning. “Oral hermeneutics is an art that cherishes and chases meaningful metaphor, mystery, and imagination without diminishing or devaluing the mind”

(156). Oral hermeneutics integrates, as well as dissects, the text. Textual hermeneutics: grammar, categories, ideas... persuasion through propositional logic. Oral hermeneutics: aesthetics, concreteness, symbols, stories, ritual, persuasion through revelation. Oral hermeneutics, driven by narrative logic, is an interpretive process that creates character theology. The Holy Spirit is always present to ensure clarity and credibility. Instead of analyzing grammar, decode concrete characters and contexts using imagination, emotions, and reason. Narrative logic relies on coherence, truthfulness, interconnectedness, and identification. Oral hermeneutics begins not with abstract grammar but with concrete characters: humans, spirits, animals, and insects. “Orality shouts, ‘Picture this!’ Oral hermeneutics shouts, ‘Experience this!’ Character theology shouts, ‘Watch this!’ Application shouts, ‘Routinize this!’ Christianity shouts, ‘Erupt with thanks to the Eternal!’ (Psalms 107:1)” (171).

Character-Centric Questions

A parable is a house in which the reader or listener is invited to take up residence. Jesus was the message and model. He was a quintessential questioner. Mystery teaches truths rather than telling them. Telling eliminates participation and learning by solving the mystery. Jesus did not have Q & A sessions, but Q & Q sessions. Jesus asked ten questions when they forgot to buy bread (Mark 8:14-21). There is an art and science of asking questions. “Biblical characters reveal the Creator through conversations, conflict, conduct, and context” (181).

Questions originate from assumptions. Well-thought-through questions will help enlightenment to dawn more than an immediate answer would. Smart people are not those who have the right answers but those who ask the most perceptive questions: “The right questions asked by the right person to the right people in the right sequence and in the discovery of the right answers” (182). Curious people make for good Bible interpreters. Few have been taught to ask questions to discover what the text is asking. Character-centric questions are to reveal the Creator through the thoughts, actions, and interactions of the biblical characters. “Conversations, by design, are reciprocal, risky, yet rewarding” (190). Let the question emerge from the text. Who, What, and How are concrete questions, while “Why” needs more abstract thinking. Questions should advance beyond awareness to application. Questions need to be designed to address the specific moral value systems: 1) Innocence and guilt; 2) Honor and Shame; 3) Power and Fear; 4) Purity and Pollution.

Character Theology Demonstrated

The second part of the book demonstrates the method of Character Theology through practical engagement, especially in relation to the Jonah narrative. The story of Jonah was facilitated in a Bible discussion in three places on three continents: the Philippines (Asia), Africa, and Florida (North America). The story has to be memorized, internalized, and delivered. First, the storyteller should be walking into the story and then taking it to others. Character-centric questions are a bit like using a magnifying glass or spotlight, or a freeze-frame.

Challenge

The authors conclude that Tri-communicators, those who can teach through the ‘middle way’—a hybrid of oral, print, and digital—will reign in the twenty-first century. Character Theology complements systematic theology and makes effective communication of the gospel and the biblical truths to today’s postmodern and digital people. With an easy methodology of

communication embedded in culture, many simple, humble, amateur storytellers and facilitators could become theological educators for the local churches.

Book Review

Abeneazer G. Urga, Elizabeth W. Mburu, and Ferdinand I. Okorie, eds., *An African Introduction to the New Testament*

Reviewed by Abyot S. Gashute

Published in *Global Missiology*, www.missiology.org, July 2026

Urga, Abeneazer G., Elizabeth W. Mburu, and Ferdinand I. Okorie, eds. (2026). *An African Introduction to the New Testament*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, ISBN: 9798889836513 (hardback), US \$67.00, pp. 570; ISBN: 9798889836520 (ebook).

In the *African Introduction to the New Testament*, edited by Abeneazer G. Urga, Elizabeth W. Mburu, and Ferdinand I. Okorie, 25 African New Testament scholars seek to provide an Africa-centered introduction to the books of the New Testament. The editors contend that “In most instances, students in Africa use introductory texts that have a Eurocentric orientation” (xv). They argue that introductory books from the Minority World “are unable to ask and answer questions that are relevant in the African context. This volume seeks to address this gap” (xv). The aim is to address the lack of such a book and to reduce African theology students’ overreliance on Eurocentric materials.

The book is written primarily “for African students in theological institutions and Bible Colleges” (xv). However, it is also beneficial for pastors, church leaders, and ministers. The volume focuses on introductory matters of the New Testament books while exploring and applying the biblical theological themes of each book from diverse African sociocultural, religious, and political perspectives. This multifaceted aim constitutes the role of each contributor: to first explore the introductory matters of a particular Bible book in a more traditional way (historical-grammatical matters) and then identify and explore relevant themes from contemporary African contexts.

The editors are convinced that “By so doing, the theological, Christological, pneumatological, and ecclesial dimensions of the Christian faith in the African context are broadly identified as readers are invited to deepen their appreciation of these themes in their various contexts and experiences of encountering with God” (xv). The volume is an introductory book on the New Testament by Christian African scholars for Christian Africans, which takes the biblical (first-century Greco-Roman) context and African contextual realities seriously. According to the editors, the purpose of the book is “to equip theological students in the African context with tools necessary to understand and address both biblical and contextual issues in ministry and/or academia” (xvi).

The editors also acknowledge that the book is “not meant to replace Eurocentric introductory books, but rather to complement them by offering an African lens” (xvi). They also admit that the volume does not address all the rich and diverse African cultural heritages and contextual realities, even though the 25 contributing scholars come from various African cultural and church-tradition backgrounds. Hence, the editors state that “the representative voices from the continent in this volume offer readers an invitation to delve deeper into a contextual interaction with the biblical texts from their own peculiar and unique cultural world” (xvi).

The book consists of 24 chapters. The first two chapters offer a discussion of an interpretive context and hermeneutical techniques that enable the analysis of each book of the New Testament

from African contextual realities. In chapter 1, Bitrus A. Sarman explores and analyzes the New Testament in relation to the sociocultural and religious realities of the African context (1–26). In this section, Sarman observes similarities and differences between the New Testament world and African contexts while noting the impact of the gospel in Africa from both retrospective and prospective views.

In chapter 2, Elizabeth W. Mburu presents a contextually sensitive African biblical hermeneutical tool (27–54). Mburu discusses Africentric hermeneutical approaches, assumptions, and common characteristics. She contends that the Majority World needs a hermeneutical tool that helps them explore the worlds behind, of, and in front of the text while considering African contextual realities (27). She observes that the rapid growth of the Church in Africa, challenges in interpreting biblical texts, and the lack of an Africentric hermeneutical tool necessitate the development of a unique African biblical hermeneutics (28). In this section, she introduces a five-step African biblical hermeneutics using the analogy of a four-legged stool (four legs and a seat), which parallels the African, theological, literary, historical, and application contexts (35–37). She also offers a demonstration and application of the method using two sample texts from the New Testament (37–53).

Chapters 3 to 24 are dedicated to each book of the New Testament in the order they appear in the Christian Bible. Each chapter follows a uniform structure: each contributor first addresses the historical context (authorship, date, audience) and the literary context (genre, outline) of the book, then identifies biblical-theological themes that resonate with specific contemporary African contexts and offers discussion. Each contributor seeks to engage in critical analysis of the original language (Greek) and, where necessary, African native languages to better elaborate and understand the text. This linguistic approach appears to be a unique feature of this volume.

Although the contributors to each chapter on a New Testament book follow a uniform structure while engaging with diverse biblical-theological themes that resonate with African contextual realities, the volume makes it evident that the themes identified in each New Testament book are limited to the immediate contextual realities of the contributors' backgrounds. The discussions center on what appears relevant to the contributors, based on their cultural and contextual exposure, experience, and encounters. In so doing, the volume appears to leave out themes that would have been addressed by other New Testament scholars from other parts of the continent who did not contribute to the volume. This tilted focus is one of the book's main weaknesses. The volume has no representation from North Africa—e.g., Egypt, Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, Libya—where there were several centers and origins of key thinkers in the early African Christian world. The volume, while representing West Africa (Ghana, Nigeria), East Africa (Ethiopia, Kenya), Central Africa (Congo), and Southern Africa (South Africa, Zambia), appears to be dominated by East Africans (Ethiopia and Kenya). In the subsequent edition of the volume, these limitations require attention from the editors.

Another observable weakness of this volume is the lack of clarity regarding the methodology employed by each contributor. There are a few instances where a contributor's methodology is clearly defined and described. However, in most cases the methodology followed is not clear. This is another area in which this volume needs to improve in its subsequent editions. Moreover, one would anticipate that most contributors would use the African biblical hermeneutical framework introduced in chapter 2 of the volume as an interpretive method, yet this is not the case. Such an

exercise would have increased the volume's unique feature as an African introduction to the New Testament.

Despite the areas highlighted for improvement, this book is a groundbreaking contribution to African biblical and New Testament scholarship. The volume is a valuable resource for theology students, teachers, church leaders, and ministers. It can be used as a primary teaching text in theological seminaries in Africa. Furthermore, Western scholars, theology students, church leaders, and ministers can benefit from this volume to gain rich insights into reading, interpreting, and applying the New Testament from African contexts.

Book Review

Collin Hansen, Skyler R. Flowers, and Ivan Mesa, eds., *The Gospel After Christendom: An Introduction to Cultural Apologetics*

Reviewed by Curran D. Bishop

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Hansen, Collin, Skyler R. Flowers, and Ivan Mesa, eds. (2025). *The Gospel After Christendom: An Introduction to Cultural Apologetics*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, ISBN: 9780310175476 (hardcover), \$26.99, pp. 224; (ebook) \$13.99.

Church planters often prepare for post-Christian communities by expecting overt secularism. My own experience in New England has been different. Many of my neighbors still belong to churches they rarely attend, retain positive impressions of Christianity, and instinctively turn to the Church at moments of crisis. The challenge is not militant atheism so much as a culture shaped by consumerism, therapeutic individualism, and fragmented meaning. Into this context *The Gospel After Christendom* argues that evangelism must once again become an exercise in cultural apologetics: demonstrating not merely that Christianity is true, but that it makes sense of the world people actually inhabit.

Summary

The book contains 13 chapters whose authors have extensive experience in thinking and writing on the topic of apologetics. In *The Gospel After Christendom*, these authors define cultural apologetics, explain how it works, examine the questions cultural apologetics seeks to answer, and analyze the contexts where cultural apologetics is needed. While a description of each contributor's work is beyond the scope of this review, I will discuss four major themes that correspond to its four parts.

Cultural apologetics as pre-evangelism: Trevin Wax notes, "cultural apologetics is a form of preevangelism.... We shine the light of the gospel in a way that affirms their God-given deepest longings and aspirations while exposing the misdirection that leads to lies, half-truths, and unhappiness." The work of the cultural apologist is "showing how the gospel fulfills the deepest longings of the people in a society *and* exposing the lies people in that society believe" (18). In this vein, Christopher Watkin points out that because the God who made our world has revealed himself in his Word, the gospel is "familiar but strange." The Bible's description of our world and condition "fits the human condition like a glove" (41). But gloves are strangely shaped so they can envelope the human hand. All our culture's longings are perfectly addressed in God's Word. Joshua Chatraw demonstrates that, though the term is new, the approach described as "cultural apologetics" appears across church history in the work of apologists from Origen to Augustine, Pascal to C.S. Lewis.

The posture of the apologist: Alan Noble argues that the apologist's posture must avoid both cowardly accommodation and hostile condemnation. From a posture of grace the apologist desires to see the Holy Spirit working in their interlocutors, and this posture frees apologists from veering into confrontation or syncretistic compromise. Daniel Strange urges apologists to subversively fulfill the unrecognized desires of the culture. The utter uniqueness of the gospel both calls all human beings to repent of our failures and appeals to our deepest desires as fallen image bearers.

Sutanto delves into the multi-pronged goal of apologetics sketched above. Because God can change hearts, the apologist has hope for the outcome of their task. Gavin Ortland calls the apologist to expose unbelief as “unlivable” (102). Many members of Western culture today believe the world is disenchanted, meaningless, and lonely. The apologist gets to invite such broken people into the reality of wonder, meaning, and restored relationships.

Goodness, beauty, and truth: Rebecca McLaughlin shows that apologetics answers the question “Is Christianity good?” by demonstrating that the whole basis for accepted international morality rests on biblical presuppositions. Rachel Gilson demonstrates Christianity’s beauty by noting that beauty requires morality. Without morality there is no beauty; there is only the survival of the fittest. Churches must therefore “walk the talk” of exhibiting the beauty of moral integrity in order not to convey ugliness to people to whom they preach. Derek Rishmawy points out that the truth of Christianity is far more foundational than mere pragmatism. While Christianity’s truth “works” for people’s subjective needs, the Christian faith also must be universally true or it provides nothing.

The Church as the context of apologetics: Bob Thune notes that apologetics is essentially ecclesiological. People experience the gospel in the context of relationship; they experience Christ in his body, the Church. James Eglinton argues for the need for contexts where the implicit experience of Christianity could progress to explicit discussion of how Christianity shapes life. These settings can be ministries that serve the poor, small-group book clubs, public lectures, and invitations into a Christian home. Sam Chan translates Paul’s sermon in Acts 17 to address Western cultural idols: youth sports, step counters, movies, air travel, doing laundry. His insights are a helpful, practical challenge and reinforcement Christians’ practice of evangelism.

Analysis

Although nearly every contributor—all fellows with The Gospel Coalition’s Keller Center for Cultural Apologetics (The Gospel Coalition, 2026)—writes from North American or British contexts, the book raises fruitful questions for global missions. Missiology, it could be argued, is itself cultural apologetics: examining the assumptions and aspirations of particular peoples in order to communicate the gospel faithfully. The book therefore offers less a new missionary strategy than a fresh vocabulary for describing practices that cross-cultural workers have employed for generations. Readers serving outside the secular West will need to translate many of the book’s examples, but its central insight—that apologetics must engage the hopes and fears already embedded within a culture—is widely applicable. Indeed, what the editors describe as “cultural apologetics” will sound strikingly familiar to missiologists. Long before Western societies became post-Christian, missiologists have urged learning local narratives, identifying points of contact, exposing idols, and demonstrating how the gospel fulfilled rather than merely contradicted a people’s deepest aspirations. In that sense, the book represents not so much a new apologetic as the rediscovery of a missionary instinct within Western evangelicalism.

Conclusion

The Gospel After Christendom succeeds in recovering apologetics as a missionary discipline rather than merely an intellectual one. It reminds readers that evangelism is not simply the presentation of propositions but the communication of the gospel within particular cultures and imaginations. While the book’s examples arise almost exclusively from the contemporary West, its central conviction—that every culture possesses longings the gospel both fulfills and corrects—offers an

important framework for Christians engaged in witness wherever Christendom has faded, never existed, or is rapidly changing.

References

The Gospel Coalition. (2026). The Keller Center for Cultural Apologetics. TGC.
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