

A Wide Embrace: The Heart of Christ and Mission Today

OMSC Student Seminars on World Mission

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Mercy Center, Madison, Connecticut

January 12, 2007: 9:30 to 11:20 a.m.

Introduction: I believe it would be irresponsible scholarship if I did not begin my talk with reference to Mickey Volf's award winning book, *Exclusion and Embrace*.¹ The catalyst for his book is still the context for our discussion today. This is how Volf frames the issue that gave rise to the book:

After I finished my lecture, Professor Moltmann stood up and asked one of his typical questions, both concrete and penetrating: "But can you embrace a *cetnik*?" It was the winter of 1993. For months now the notorious Serbian fighters, known as *cetnik* had been sowing desolation in my native country, herding people into concentration camps, raping women, burning down churches and destroying cities. I had just argued that we should embrace our enemies as God has embraced us in Christ. Can I embrace a *cetnik*, the ultimate other, so to speak, the evil other? What would justify the embrace? Where would I draw the strength for it? What would it do to my identity as a human being, as a Croat?²

The questions are still quite real, deeply troubling and more timeless than most of us can imagine. Whereas Volf speaks as a theologian of a particular social and cultural location, today, I will speak as a missiologist struggling to maintain, inter-cultural awareness and a global historical accountability, while speaking as a real person caught in the web of a sin-savage world. My approach is simple. I will first briefly discuss the **concept of embrace** and explain the help and the limits of using such a concept to help us think missiologically. Then I will look at **three contextual themes** that must be lifted up if we are going to think constructively about Christian mission for the future. These themes are: flat world, heartless world and religious world. Finally, I will look at **two theological concepts** that I recommend we use, almost as two eyes with which to see, or two hands with which to work, as we participate in God's mission today. Thus, a definition, three contextual themes and two theological eyes. First, I give you the definition.

Embrace: A definition

Embrace (Em-brace): "To bring in with one's arms; to hug or hold to one's bosom." To be embraced is to be fully received and protected; to be embraced is to be completely open, candid and vulnerable. To embrace another is to unconditionally receive, include and comfort. Children embraced by their parents, husbands embraced by their wives, elderly parents embraced by their, now adult children, all are protected, secure and fully accepted. An embrace is a coming home for the soul.

¹ The full title is, *Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness and Reconciliation* (Nashville: Abingdon Press), 1996.

² M Volf, p. 9.

Embrace is full acceptance which provides protection and a home, but it is also a place of great vulnerability. The one embracing, while showing complete acceptance, is, at the same time, open to being stabbed in the back. "Et tu Brute?" We generally only embrace someone we know who receives us as we are. We refrain from embracing someone we can not trust. At times, however, in an effort to accept, heal or reconcile, we may take the risk of embracing "the other" who is unknown and restless, but who is also in need of a home. At this point, the risks of embrace may be absolute. When we see the innocent peacemaker or reconciler raped, laid open with a switchblade or gunned down without a thought, our very soul is also torn with a chaotic mass of thoughts and emotions. Revenge, pity and anger come to us, but then also respect and then silence. Yes, the risks of embrace may be total, but the risks of refraining from embracing are also total. The fear of embrace sucks life out of a young girl, a family, or a community.

Another way of seeing this contrast is to remember that there is the embrace of God, and then there is the embrace of Judas. An embrace can be an absolute surrender and union, or, in our fallen world, it can be a betrayal and even death. There is an embrace of death. An octopus is designed to embrace to death. I have watched a 21 foot reticulated python embrace my neighbor's cat. It was not a pretty sight. It was the embrace that consumes. Thus, as we look to define "embrace" we must remember, as in all ethical discussion, there are the limits to our use of abstract nouns as well as nouns used figuratively in theological discussions. There is a Judas, a black widow spider, an octopus, a python. Like any other good concept, we must make sure that we don't ask the word to do more than it was meant to do. Embrace, must have limits and not be expected to be a panacea either for the world's ills, or for what Christian mission means.³ Let's look further at the concept.

A true embrace, however is not a one way hug like that of a predator. A true embrace is reciprocal, it is received and there is a response. However, any and every embrace must be initiated by one person or one party. One can expect that when the child falls and runs to the father or mother crying, that the child will not just hug mummy, but mummy will hug the child in return. To switch our analogy only slightly, the father hugs with great joy and relief the daughter who had run away from home and now returned. The full embrace and reception is half of the reconciliation or healing for both. There are times, however, when an embrace is not appropriate. Is this not true? Aren't there times when an embrace can be out of season? "There is a time to embrace and a time to refrain from embracing" (Ecclesiastes 3:5). I first learned this truth when I was 18 years old and returning from two-and-a-half months of backpacking through Europe. I came in to the church office to talk with the new young youth pastor who I had met only briefly before leaving for Europe. We did not see eye-to-eye in June before I left, nor when I returned in August. I was a young convert; he a hurt and cynical young pastor. In August, after my hour-long discussion, we still did not get along well. I was sharing my heart with the young pastor, and he felt it was his job to challenge me on every assumption and statement I made. My faith was a young plant, his seemed like a steam roller. As I got up to leave, I stuck out my hand to show him that I was a gentleman and that I still respected him and our relationship. He, however came over, gave me a great big bear hug and said, "What's wrong, Scott, you seem to be resisting? Don't pull

³ Pluralism (which is an important element of Christianity and of social order) is another word that we often ask to do too much work. Pluralism is important, but it is not an ultimate or final value.

away, give me a big hug.” It was not time to embrace. An embrace reflects mutual acceptance and reconciled relationships. A false embrace can conceal rejection or disagreements, and perpetuate a lie. A false embrace says, “Yes, we all get along and respect one another,” when in fact we do not. Embracing others can be risky business, it can conceal deception or it can side-step real pain and rejection. It can also be lethal.

As I talk about embrace today, however, I am not talking about something that we do on our own, but something that God has done unilaterally. God has been rejected by his creation and has turned back to that creation and, in spite of humanity’s rejection and deception, God moves toward and embraces his own. We are embraced. From the Father’s side it has meant a movement of reconciliation and warmth which has become the painful and costly embrace of the cross: arms wide open to receive the other. “The other” responds to this embrace with nails and thorns.

Now, what do we do with that divine embrace? How do we receive it and what does that mean for our identity as individuals and our identity as people who are embraced by God? God’s embrace has made us new people. His embrace has redefined who we are. Again, the embrace of a hurt child illumines this dimension the best. When one of our children was playing with others and then fell down off the slide, or fell out of the swing, the pain was often more emotional than physical. Running to me for a hug, it would take about 30 seconds to a minute of reassurance and warmth, and then the child would run back to play with her or his friends. The embrace empowers by reminding the child of God that she is secure, accepted and thus, she is able to pass on the love to others. The child who has not been embraced, or who doesn’t have a home in God is ill-equipped to love others. It is God’s wide embrace, God’s prodigal love, which is the point and power of Christian mission. The embrace empowers the other to be united with God, as a unique a gifted image bearer, and then the other is sent out into the dangerous world to embrace God’s own.

Thus, we do not embrace this heartless world as an act of the will; it is God who embraces. We, who have been embraced are asked to receive, trust and risk. We now follow the pattern of Christ, and are changed by God’s wide embrace, but we are only able to love, receive, and empower in a derivative manner. So as we study God’s wide embrace, we learn both, more of God’s character and we learn more of our “trajectory of holiness.” I would now like to look at three contextual dimensions of God’s wide embrace of a prickly and recalcitrant world today. After this, we will look at the theological resources that help us understand our identification with a God who is so extravagant, and who suffers such joy.

I. A Wide Embrace in a Flat World

The context of embrace has become radically different in the past 20 years. Those of us (or of you) under forty hardly remember a world where we did not daily, or continually, have the possibility of contact with friends or family. Last summer I brought our new seminary president and two faculty members to China. My new boss, William Carl, is cyber-wired. He was to preach in a church in Beijing for an evening service. During the call to worship and opening hymn he pulled out his Blackberry and emailed the pastoral staff at his old church, First Presbyterian Church, Dallas, and told them to pray for him as he was getting ready to preach in China. Before he stepped up to the pulpit, the interim pastor emailed his response from the pastor’s study in Dallas.

“We are praying for you,” came the message through 12 time zones. God is entering the cyber-prayer network, are you?

When I was leaving Singapore just 12 years ago, I did not use the internet at all. It was available, but it was both expensive and clumsy: there was only “dial up” service. When I began work on the *Dictionary of Asian Christianity* in 1990 I communicated with over 500 people by letter. Some people had fax machines. Most of the articles received before I returned to the United States in 1995 were mailed to me (hard copy). About 95% of the articles that I received from 1996-99 were emailed as attachments. Today, I submit all book reviews, articles and manuscripts as attachments. I received papers from Pittsburgh students via email attachments in Cambodia and China last summer. All of this illustrates just the tip of the iceberg of a global transformation that is taking place and moving the world from a place of hierarchy and division to a world that, in Thomas Friedman’s words, is flat. The marginalized now have access to information and power as never before. The flat world is described by Friedman⁴ in ten different ways—mostly built around a concern for trade and economics. I would like to focus on four of these changes that will affect missional involvement for the coming decades.

First, Friedman identifies 11-9-89 as a critical date when “the walls came down and Windows went up.” The collapse of the Berlin Wall tipped the scales towards those who advocated free trade and free market economies, and away from those advocating more authoritarian rule and planned economies. In addition, the introduction of Windows 3.0 operating system linked computers together and people with computers across the great technology divide. Technological and ideological borders were breached making it possible for both people and ideas to move globally as never before. The walls came down.

Secondly, Friedman notes that people were more freely connected after 1991. The first web site was set up in August of 1991 by Tim Berners-Lee in the U.K. to help scientists share data more conveniently. Berners-Lee fought to keep the site “open, non-proprietary and free.” This meant that it would not be controlled by an authority or force. Others could access the site and post new information. With Berners-Lee’s web site and the advent of Netscape (August, 1995), it now became possible to search for information across the many websites that were popping up. There was a new openness to information as never before in the history of humanity. Anyone with a few rupees can search for information at an internet café in Calcutta. The information available is grotesque and dehumanizing. But the information is also beautiful, intricate and wonderful. However, the combination of these two new concepts—information that was now open, non-proprietary and free—along with the ability to easily search for information, gave common people knowledge and with knowledge has come **power**.

Thirdly, Friedman identifies the advent of “work-flow software” as another world flattener. For example, Disney cartoons are not produced by a group of techno-artists in Burbank, California. In fact, Disney cartoons are produced through a global supply chain of artists who can “log on” and participate in a global cartoon project from Starbucks, internet cafes, or from their living rooms. A number of universally accepted software “systems” has made it possible to easily share information and to “connect” to each other. SMTP (“simple mail transfer protocol”) enabled email exchange between heterogeneous computer systems. This easy access to information and systems has meant that

⁴ *The World is Flat: A Brief History of the Twenty-first Century*, (2005, revised, 2006).

“professionals” and “academic elites” are not making all of the decisions. In fact, with this flattening of information and communication, a radical democratization of information power has taken place.⁵ Virtual companies are developing and these virtual companies have more collaboration and more creative community participation in decisions and production.

The fourth and final flattener I would like to mention, is that of “uploading.” Since more people and communities can participate, projects can be built with the creative participation of many people adding or even altering work that is being done. Friedman notes that the basic underlying software for ecommerce, Apache Shareware, was developed by a global community of volunteers; not by a company of paid professionals. With uploading technologies, middlemen, large corporations and large institutions are cut out of the process as people directly share ideas and move forward. This uploading ability has produced Wikipedia, podcasting, blogging and YouTube (all of which are not even in my spell-checker). This does not mean that large companies and corporate offices are no longer necessary, just that they have limits and they must adapt to the flat world they have helped to create. To make the transition to missionary work, the radical democratization that has been brought about in the flat world, means that large denominational mission societies, as well as trans-denominational missions must make room for well-connected and aware amalgamated and “webbed” mission societies. This will give a whole new dimension to the concept of ecumenical sharing.

One final note in borrowing from Friedman’s thought-provoking book: Through all of this world flattening that has taken place, China and India have benefited the most. They have seized the opportunity and moved forward. I would suggest, however, that all nations that have a modicum of technology in place (Vietnam, Thailand, Malaysia, Kenya, etc.) can be huge winners. When it comes to Christian mission, this will mean that something that has never happened since before the Council of Nicaea will be taking place: Mission will more and more be taking place from eccentric places, from the flat places, rather than from the center. In this more democratic world, there will be more power directly to the people for mission. We have seen it happening with the estimated 18,000 cross-cultural Indian missionaries working in India, and the 14-19,000 missionaries from Korea.⁶ Brazil, Nigeria, Ghana, Singapore, Malaysia, Indonesia and of course China are also on the rise.

In addition, there will continue to be more and more creative partnerships of western and non-western missionaries working in teams. There will be less need to go through the WCC, the NCC, the denominational headquarters, or to have an official “memorandum of understanding” to validate such multi-national and multi-denominational cooperation. The flat worlders live Nike’s old watchword: “Just do it.” This is the future of mission and it requires a new type of leadership. Leadership for the 21st century flat world will have to be deeply spiritual (a la Philippians 2), responsive and theologically adept. Although these changes have brought about a radically democratic

⁵ The best example I know of was provided by Friedman: the choice of “Pay Pal” by “ebay” for their automatic payment system. “ebay” was working on a payment system, but finally customers intervened and basically said, “Would you guys quit fighting? WE want a standard—and by the way, we have picked the standard and it’s called PayPal.” ebay, rather than fighting for “their standard,” simply accepted the choice of their customers and as a result, everyone was a winner.

⁶ From Timothy Kiho Park, Fuller Theological Seminary, in *UCLA International*, 17 November, 2006. http://www.international.ucla.edu/showevent_avantgo.asp?eventid=5347 Accessed 2 January, 2007.

shift, the key, as always will be the development of leaders who are both spiritually and theologically deep. Education or leadership development is as important as ever.

II. A Wide Embrace is a Heartless World:

There is much to be pleased about when it comes to thinking about mission in a flat world. As with all technological developments the possibility of greater evil is the persistent dark shadow over our shoulder. And yet the world flattening is more than technology; it is also a mindset of collaborative, free access and non-proprietary labor. It also means the recession of the modern hierarchical model and greater freedom for all to participate. It means the loss of planned economies and, again it means greater openness. Venezuelan President Chavez, is swimming up stream if he suddenly nationalizes the utilities, oil companies and banking. That old top-down type of CEO, monarchical, planned economy and rule is not the present nor is it the future.

But now we look at the second element of the contemporary context for mission: the heartless world of violence, disease, poverty and domination. If I can take you briefly back to the seventeenth century, we find that the beginning of the Enlightenment and modern thought was found in the despair brought on by the religious wars. Rene Descartes (1596-1650) actually participated in much of this fighting, including the beginning of the 30 Years War and the Roman Catholic siege of the Protestant city of La Rochelle (1618) along the western coast of France. The battles involved Dutch ships, British ships and soldiers and thousands of men religiously killing one another. We are not sure, but it seems likely that Descartes' participation was a distant one, providing geometric calculations for building the bulwarks and for preparing for the long siege. The great Enlightenment philosopher (and many others like him) became discouraged. Religious wars had been going on for 100 years and in this particular battle, the leader of the aggressor French army was the famous Cardinal Richelieu. Descartes became disillusioned with his very, very violent war and so he went back to his study and began to ask what the world was all about. What can I really know? Well, I know I exist, because I can think. Thus started the Enlightenment; very much as a reaction against religious violence.

Does this sound familiar? There are many people today who argue that religion is the problem and so they just want a religionless world. There is no such thing. The world may seem as heartless as never before, but not much has changed. The names, places and players change around, but when I think of the Chinese government bombing the Yellow River levees to keep out the Japanese in 1938 (a tactic that failed), and then think of the millions of people who died in the self-inflicted floods...well, I can't think of a modern parallel. In this case, a government actually caused the death of about 3 million of its own citizens. And then there is the Great Leap Forward where an estimated 20 million died of starvation. What about North Korea and its own self-inflicted mass murder of millions by the Kim Jung Il and Kim Il Sung? And then there is Hitler, Idi Amin, et cetera, et cetera.

It is a heartless world and it always has been. One would have hoped that God would just step in and wipe out those heartless people. But then we realize that since Jesus raised the bar in Matthew 5, we all come under that condemnation, so we would be calling for our own judgment. Instead, God calls us to be sheep among wolves. We are called by God to love the enemy. I am simply saying we should not be surprised by the violence, hate and oppression of the defenseless. We may be called to embrace the

defenseless, and in that embrace, we too are sacrificed. If only we were all so worthy to receive such a high calling. Such identification with Christ is not to be sought directly, but it is to be embraced when and if it comes.

Just a few final comments on how we should think about the embrace of God in a heartless world are in order. First, we need to remember the city. If there is any place that needs the embrace of God's love in Jesus Christ it is America's cities. In fact, it can be argued that the integrity of our global witness is at stake. For example, if we are segregated, unjust, homeless and violent in our own cities, where is the power of transformation that we proclaim? What do we have to offer if we have not properly addressed our own neighborhoods first? In fact, I would argue that as we learn to properly embrace our own cities (and this may first mean relocating to the city), we will be better prepared to embrace a world that is not that much different. We must deal with tribal warfare, unjust economic structures, out-of-wedlock births, housing issues and how to communicate to someone very different, the same love of God that I have received.

The second area we need to think about is how we approach global violence. We don't solve the problem of violence in all of our cities at once, but we do begin by moving to the cities and finding our own corners or neighborhoods to begin to preach the Prince of Peace. In the same way, we approach the global problem of violence in particular neighborhoods with their own particular matrix of sinful behaviors and structures. I remember Jim and Carol Breese returning to Pittsburgh after 9-11-01. They received almost daily emails and phone calls from Muslim friends in Pakistan asking them to return, and yet their mission had pulled them out because of the fear of violence against Americans. They finally returned—earlier than the mission board wanted, but later than they wanted—and they continue to bring healing to poor Muslim families. Carol is an obstetrician birthing cute little Muslim babies and saving sick and malnourished Muslim mothers. Jim is praying for the fathers, in the name of Jesus Christ. And yet, violence encircles the Breese family in Pakistan.

As Miroslav Volf muses in his *Exclusion and Embrace*, the world is full of Cains; people who know that violence is wrong—whether it be from insecurity, anger, resentment or self-arrogation—and yet they kill, maim and rape. Does the mission of Jesus Christ require that we embrace without regard for response? Is this the nature of “laying down your life for your friends?” (John 15:13) No. As we mentioned in the opening section, it is God who embraces and we who point to that acceptance and the possibility of real forgiveness, reconciliation and adoption. As Volf says, “In a sense, the same can be said of every Cain: the embrace of the Crucified will not heal him if he does not learn to love the one who embraced him. Cain, the anti-type who “murdered his brother,” will be healed by Christ, the “type” who “laid down his life for us,” only if he sets out to walk in Christ's footsteps (I John 3:11-17).⁷

It is a dangerous mission to walk into the Baghdads, the Beiruts, Cairos, Mogadishus, Timbuktus and Islamabads and tell of the grace of God offered in Jesus

⁷ Volf, p. 98. From I John: “15 Anyone who hates his brother is a murderer, and you know that no murderer has eternal life in him. 16 This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers. 17 If anyone has material possessions and sees his brother in need but has no pity on him, how can the love of God be in him?” Volf then goes on to outline how it is that anyone can move from such violence against the other (exclusion) to embrace. He outlines the movement in four sections in his chapter on “Embrace:” a. repentance, b. forgiveness, c. making space in oneself for the other, d. healing of memory.

Christ. And yet, is it really any more dangerous than it has been in the past? When was the safe and easy time to announce the Good News? I am working on an edited book entitled the *History of Presbyterian Mission: 1944-2004*. Part of the project has involved interviewing about 65 retired missionaries, aged 65 to 95. When going over their 25 to 45 years in cross cultural mission it becomes clear that they have had a very difficult time. Some have lost children to tropical diseases. One gentlemen started the interview by saying that they worked through four regional wars. Most were displaced, but some chose to stay and were imprisoned by Chinese, Japanese, Vietnamese, and others. Violence abounds in a world that doesn't know that it has been accepted and reconciled. And so we redouble our efforts to show the love of God in Christ Jesus, even when it appears that our neighbors are not interested.

III. A Wide Embrace in Religious world:⁸

The world has always been peopled with spirits, idols, gods and angels. Only for a brief time in the West (and still in much of western Europe) did we forget that. People have always come to worship God in Christ, from worshipping some other gods or idols or spirits. Today's world is just as religious as the world that Jesus stepped into. It is the great fortune of today's scholars that we have the writings of Rodney Stark that have contradicted and filled out the earlier "Age of Anxiety" thesis of E.R. Dodds. Dodds' thesis was that Christianity came into the world when, to use a Durkheimian phrase, "the old gods were dying while the new gods had not yet been born." Paganism had reached its end and along came the inviting teachings of Jesus Christ and so now we can explain the growth and development of Christianity. Christ came at an auspicious time. But Rodney Stark,⁹ a sociologist, has noted that, no, in fact the old pagan gods were as alive, vital and attractive as ever. As with all religions, when there are new movements and new expressions of the old, this is a sign of vitality, not decline. Pagan religions were powerful, expanding and healthy. The number of cults and gods was a sign of vitality, as in India today. So the first and second century world was not unlike our world. The European world was pluralistic, hedonistic and it had the confidence of Empire behind it. Christianity offered something more attractive. It honored all people, rejected violence against the unborn and the newly born, respected women and taught compassion for the sick and dying. Its followers were those who "loved unto death," their neighbors, in the pattern of their leader, the crucified one.

The Persian world to the east, where Christianity probably grew even faster and stronger, had a unified religion (Zoroastrianism) that was shot through with paganism (astrology: see Matthew 2:1-12 where magi are clearly astrologers, too). This type of religion is still in place in Indonesia, South Asia and in many regions of north, east and west Africa. The context for missional work is very similar. My son went to a village in Senegal and preached to the chief, his wives and children that they need not give all of their money to the Meribu (witch doctors) to intervene against angry spirits. Jesus has already conquered the spirits. They can trust in Jesus to give them victory. My son was 20 and the village was all Muslim; Muslim animists.

⁸ See Appendix I for the top stories of religious persecution for 2006.

⁹ Rodney Stark, *The Rise of Christianity: How the Obscure, Marginal Jesus Movement Became the Dominant Religious Force in the Western World in a Few Centuries*, 1996.

Islam is experiencing an Imperial and militant revival, not the theological revival it needs. It is not true that masses of people are converting to Islam. In fact two factors are keeping the number of Muslim believers high. First, many Muslim people are afraid to leave Islam, even though it has not served them well. Secondly, Muslims are having many children because of their poverty and the low level of education. Islam is very diverse and in most regions, Islam is a community faith that provides some social harmony and a web of meaning and significance. Still, mass numbers of people are not turning to the Prophet. There are vital financial, ideological, and militant efforts to spread Islam, but I believe these efforts are likely to be rooted in the threat of the West and Christianity. Muslims fear both the secular hedonism of the West and the religion of the West. Most have not made a distinction between the two.

Another reason for anxiety among Muslims is that Muslims in South Asia (I know mostly about Pakistan and Bangladesh and south Myanmar) and in West Africa, are having dreams. The dreams are mostly about Jesus, and many of the people having the dreams are leaders (even Mullahs), or they are people who later become Christian leaders. I was a reader for a DMin thesis at Trinity Episcopal School of Ministry two years ago. The student was one of the many Anglican bishops of Nigeria. This chap came from central Nigeria and his DMin thesis came out of his personal experience in ministry. He found that most of his priests had come from Muslim families and there were certain pastoral issues involved when these converts became priests. He interviewed and studied 38 of his priests who were Muslim converts.

I don't know what he learned, but I learned a lot. One of the things I learned is that most of the former Muslims had dreams which initiated their search for the wide embrace of God. And here is the kicker: even though their vision of Jesus, or the words of God that were given to them were forgiving, warm and accepting, the road they then had to trod in following Christ was anything but forgiving, warm and accepting. ALL 38 of the priests had suffered fairly strong periods of persecution: attempted murder, maiming, removal from the house, etc. Why would they be so stubborn? Why didn't they return to a faith that would make it possible to avoid this type of persecution? I can only assume that the visions, voices and dreams were so powerful that it was undeniable that they were called to receive the embrace of Jesus Christ.

Both Hinduism and Buddhism are experiencing revivals today, but of different types than that of Islam. There are Buddhist groups in East Asia who are now imitating much of the Protestant missionary approach with slick videos, dvds, music, "mission trips" and medical clinics in poorer regions of southeast Asia. Most of these groups originate in Taiwan, but they now have centers wherever there are Chinese: in Thailand, Malaysia, Singapore, Indonesia and China. The revival of Hinduism in India is centered around the concern to promote India as a Hindu nation. The BJP party and its call for *Hindutva* is a call to restrain other religions and, frankly speaking, to keep the lower castes down. Conversion to Buddhism or to Christianity generally means that *dalits* (non-registered castes) who have been cleaning toilets and sweeping streets, will now learn to read and they will do an end run around the Hindu caste structure. In some states of India, it is very dangerous to talk to *dalits* about Jesus Christ, even though, as *dalit* theologians have reminded us in the West, "Jesus was a *dalit*." This is why Jesus speaks so clearly to their hearts; he is one of them.

I say all of this to point out that the health or vitality of religions is not an issue. The Gospel message is about God's final work overcoming all deception, all human machinations and all that would silence the voice of God. Religions, whether they be vital and violent, or listless and asleep (like many of our own churches) are the common human milieu of Christian life and mission. We affirm that God has spoken and his voice will not be silenced by our fears, or by the worship of others. Thus, on one level, we can look at the vitality of religions similar to the issue of global violence. Not much has changed. And yet our response must be much more than just an announcement or sacrificial presence.

We are called to love the Mormons who come to our door. We are called to love the angry Neo-Nazi we pass on our urban sidewalks, and to love the Muslim neighbor standing next to us at our Seven-Eleven. On one level the Muslim neighbor is not that different from the hedonist and secular business partner or colleague at the university. A common human potential (the image of God) and a common human problem (sin) unite them all with us. For all of our diversity and pluralism we do have common value and common vanity. This makes community and communication possible. As much, or maybe even more than ever, we need to find ways to express the prodigal love and embrace for all the religious folks around us. Do they reject our Jesus? Many do, including many of our own family members. Do they need the divine embrace of a crucified Lord? Absolutely, just like you and me.

IV. The Wide Embrace of the Heart of Christ: *Sacre de Coeur* and *Missio Dei* (MSC - Missionaires du Sacré-Coeur)

At this point I want us to turn to two resources, or what I have called theological themes, to help us move toward proper thought and action regarding missional calling today in light of the above discussion. To do this, I have selected an important historical theme in many revival movements and that is the concept of the sacred heart of Christ or the heart of Jesus. Before I finish this section, I hope that you will consider using such a visual image for yourselves. Secondly, I will look at some themes from Philippians that I have studied lately. I believe we would all do well to study Philippians closely as an antidote to modern western religious torpor. First, the heart of the matter.

A way of thinking about embrace is pulling close to the heart, or in this case the heart of Jesus. The heart is the center of one's being and the place where will and mind move out in passionate action. To know the heart of a person is to understand what makes them move, and act and think as they do. We all know this. We all know that a mother's heart is always with her children, even when they are grown and responsible: her heart always goes out to them, rejoicing in their hopes and wounded with their disappointments and failures. The heart is empty, alone and lost when a close one dies. I have felt it, as have many of you. But in the case of Roman Catholic devotion, the heart of Jesus means this and more. The heart of Jesus is a sacred heart and it is a suffering heart.

Sacre de Coeur is a commonly promoted 19th century devotion¹⁰ which had a firm foundation in Roman Catholic devotion as early as the 17th century. Once again I would like to affirm that the 17th and 18th centuries were also the period of special heart-

¹⁰ Symbolically the power of the devotion can be seen in the bold style of the Sacre de Coeur Church in Paris France.

felt devotion to Christ in Protestantism,¹¹ but Protestant devotion to the heart, was focused more on one's own heart of contrition. Protestant devotion expresses more of the human side (contrition and sorrow leading to repentance) while Roman Catholic, the divine side of the equation. Thus, it was the suffering heart of Jesus that was the Roman Catholic devotion and this is the devotion I would like us to recover. Our subtitle is, after all, "the heart of Christ and mission today."

During the seventeenth century a movement of devotion, a type of re-centering of devotion, grew around the concept of the "religion of the heart" specifically a special devotion to the heart of Jesus. The sacred heart of Jesus was understood to be the "divine love for all of humankind; or the human love of Jesus, and the love for God which is infused into the believer."¹² Thus, the human and divine love was fused in this devotion. Although Francois de Sales strongly encouraged devotion to the suffering heart of Jesus (symbolized by a heart pierced by two arrows, and set in a crown of thorns), it was the French Oratorian, Jean Eudes (1601-1680) who later founded the Congregation of Jesus and Mary (1644, called Eudists), who kept together the sacred heart devotion and the devotion to the BVM. He reasoned that since Jesus was divine, devotion to any part of Jesus, was devotion to God. He wrote a complete theological justification for devotion to the heart of Jesus beginning with the words, "The sacred heart of Jesus is one with the heart of the Father and the Holy Ghost."¹³ As a Protestant, I find this very interesting and appealing: devotion to the Trinity by focusing on the suffering heart of Jesus Christ. At the same time remembering the same devotion we are to replicate in the submission and obedience of Mary.

Eudes carries this devotion further. In our devotion to the heart of Jesus we are recovering the love that was lost in sin. This love, is not our own, but it is actually love that has been given to us as we have been given a new heart.

Yes, this admirable Heart is mine. It is mine because the Eternal Father has given it to me; it is mine because the Blessed Virgin has given it to me; it is mine because [Christ] himself has given it to me, not only to be my refuge and shelter in my needs, to be my oracle and my treasure, but also to be the model and rule of my life and of my actions. I wish to study this rule constantly so as to follow it faithfully....I must consider what the Heart of Jesus hates and what it loves, in order to hate only what it hates and to love only what it loves. The only thing it hates is sin...I will hate nothing but sin; I will love all that thou lovest, even my enemies.¹⁴

The love that is in the pattern of the suffering heart of Jesus Christ is a gift, and it is a gift not only for the devotee, but for those around. This is a heart, like the heart of Jesus, that is for others. Here is where Roman Catholic and Protestant devotion come together. The devotion to the heart, the contrite heart and the heart of Christ, leads to loving and self-sacrificing action.

¹¹ See Ted A. Campbell's *Religion of the Heart: A Study of European Religious Life in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries*

¹² From Ted Campbell's *The Religion of the Heart*, p. 37.

¹³ From Richard Flower's, *The Sacred Heart of Jesus*, 1946, pp 40-45. Original was in *Le Coeur admirable de trees sacree Mere de Dieu*, Book 12, chapter 11.

¹⁴ From Eudes "Fifth Meditation," as found in Flower, pp. 96f.

This devotion to the sacred heart was further developed and promoted by the suffering and melancholy theologian Sister Margaret “Mary” Alacoque (1647-1690). After years of severe deprivation and self-humiliation in the Visitation convent, she began to have a number of visions of Jesus Christ. Her clearest, strongest and most transforming vision was of Jesus who showed her his own pierced heart with a crown of thorns, surrounded by flames and “surmounted” by a cross. (Cross rising out of a heart with a crown of thorns). Christ’s heart was burning with suffering love, we might say.

Later, in the 19th century (1854), a religious order was founded in the spirit of Margaret Mary’s devotion to the heart of Jesus.¹⁵ The Society is called “Missionaries of the Sacred Heart,” (MSC) and the society’s motto is, “*Ametur ubique terrarum Cor Jesu Sacratissimum*” (May the most Sacred Heart of Jesus be loved everywhere). It was founded at Issoudun, in the Archdiocese of Bourges, France, by the Abbe Jules Chevalier.¹⁶ The very idea of spreading an understanding and love of the sacred heart of Jesus throughout the world is intriguing and theologically responsible. As you will see in the next section, such a spirituality is deeply missiological.

However, before moving on, I need to speak to Protestant sensibilities. David Bosch in his epic making article commented on the dichotomy of mission into evangelism and social action saying that this dichotomy was not fair.¹⁷ It was if we had to rate the two in each context and it ends up dividing the church as to which is most significant. Bosch argued instead that mission is like a body with a heart. The heart of mission is evangelism. Mission must not be divided, for mission is “the expression of God’s concern for the entire world”. Without the loving heart, there will be no true message of God’s love whispered into the ear of the lost, lonely and unloved. “I love you,” says the suffering and burning heart of Christ. As others have said, mission is building bridges of love from the heart of God to the heart of humanity. It is the burning heart of love, the very heart of the suffering Jesus that will give focus, passion and humility to the missionary, i.e. to you and to me. This is worth some reflection.

V. The Suffering and Glory of Embrace: Philippians

I have tried to read the Bible with the sense of missional responsibility and my first systematic stab at this is my work on Philippians during last summer and fall. Thus, most of these notes come out of that study. A number of overwhelming conclusions came to me as a result of my study. I will take them one by one with little reflection. We can elaborate upon this in our time of discussion.

First, Paul is driven to share the message of salvation with others, above all other passions. He is defined by this passion from the very beginning of the letter (choosing to be identified as a slave of Christ) and he is willing to lose his own reputation (1:17f) or even his own life (1:20f) so that others will come to know Christ. To use an earlier phrase, Paul’s heart burns for Christ. In fact, it is Christ’s very heart that is burning for others. Note in the self-reflective section early in Paul’s letter that he muses over whether he would rather die now (which he knows might happen) or if he would rather stay and help the Philippians and others. He chooses to stay, for the sake of the

¹⁵ See Appendix 2 for a “Prayer to Our Lady of the Sacred Heart”

¹⁶ See the Prayer to Our Lady of the Sacred Heart in the Appendix 2.

¹⁷ David Bosch, “Mission and Evangelism: Clarifying the Concepts,” in *Zeitschrift für Missionswissenschaft und Religionswissenschaft*, 68, July, 1984, 161-191.

Philippians. In other words, he knows that being with “Christ would be better by far” but he chooses to stay for the sake of others. His thoughts are the very thoughts of Christ who also wanted the cup of suffering to be taken from him, and yet he prayed for the young and exposed disciples (John 17) and then he said “Not my will, but thine be done.” Then in 2:15ff we see that he has the same concern for the Philippians; that their lives will speak loudly (like stars in the dark universe) to others. Throughout the letter, the concern for unity, the concern for Timothy and Epaphroditus and even the concerns for money are so that the Gospel will have good reputation and will speak clearly to others.

Secondly, it is difficult to miss that Paul’s ultimate concern is for **God’s glory**. Paul’s long prayer for the Philippians in the first chapter ends, “filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ-- to the **glory** and praise of God.” God’s glory is the aim or purpose of our lives, of our participation in God’s mission. Similarly, Paul’s beautiful and moving Philippian Hymn also ends with the concern for God’s glory. “...that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the **glory** of God the Father” (2:10f). Paul concludes the letter with a benediction focused on the purpose or end of humankind: “To our God and Father be Glory for ever, Amen.” Before that final benediction, Paul shows that there are other competing glories and they lead to destruction. In chapter 3:19 we read that those who are enemies of the cross—those who reject the loving and suffering heart of Christ—will end in destruction. What are they really like? “Their destiny is destruction, their god is their stomach, and their **glory** is in their shame. Their mind is on earthly things.” Having the very divine-human heart of Jesus Christ will keep us heavenly minded and then we will be of some earthly good. If not, our glory is our shame as we never move above the earthly existence.

Thirdly, Paul’s melancholy honesty comes through particularly clearly in this letter. The path to glory is the way of tears. There is no other way. As Peter makes clear in First Peter, the suffering is real, inescapable, but temporary. The glory (or refined gold) is a treasure that will not fade or rust. So Paul in Philippians makes it clear that those who are slaves of Christ, or to use his more common expression, those who are “in Christ,” will follow his humble path that leads to full identification and shared glory. However, in this life we can expect suffering. Paul is very direct at two places: “want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, and so, somehow, to attain to the resurrection from the dead” (3:10f); also, “For it has been granted to you on behalf of Christ not only to believe on him, but also to suffer for him,” (1:29). It would be easy to discount the faith on these and a few other verses, except that reading the whole letter we get the sense that suffering is the path, not the goal. In fact much of the goal is already here, and that brings us to my final point.

Was there every such a joyous letter? Paul not only exudes joy himself, he makes decisions that will bring joy to others (sending back Epaphroditus and Timothy), he tells about the great joy and glory to come and he even commands them to rejoice. If this is what a prison epistle sounds like, it is hard to grasp just how real this is. But then I have known of a few “prisoners” for the Lord. One was an InterVarsity man who was imprisoned in the early 1970s by the Communist government in Vietnam. He made it a point of singing hymns and praying out loud with his cell mates. So many were in prison in the 1970s it was not possible for him to be placed in his own cell. Many were being

converted to the heart of Jesus, and so the guards would move them out of his cell, breaking up a nascent church meeting. This is, I believe, what you would call the original cell group ministry. In the end, so many people were coming to Christ he was let out of prison and he later migrated to the U.S. As he told these stories to me in 1990 in Singapore, there was much rejoicing and laughter. At the time I am sure there were tears.

The second prison story came to me recently. I was having dinner with Samuel and Eileen Moffett and asked him about the great pioneer Korean pastor, Kil Sun Ju. He is a fascinating study for another time, but I asked Sam if his father, who had disciples Kil, was upset that he became so political, helping to draft and then sign the Declaration of Independence from the Japanese in 1919. All that Sam could remember about Kil personally was when he would go visit him in prison. The nearly blind Rev. Kil would spend his days memorizing the New Testament...out loud. He assumed that he would soon be blind, so he would have to memorize the New Testament to prepare sermons. He would shout the verses out loud and two years later, upon his release Rev. Kil had a steady stream of former prisoners visit him and ask the meaning of the beautiful words they had heard. What joy he had telling all these hungry people about the warm heart of Jesus. The embrace of God that was fore told, was now declared to them.

Thus ends our little study. God has embraced us and pulled us with his pierced hands to his burning heart. As followers of Christ, we have been given the very suffering heart of Christ for the world, so we invite others in to the warm divine embrace. To announce such a message, even to walk with those who need to hear this message is dangerous. It is a violent world and often religion is used as a pretext for violence. But not much has changed. God's Spirit is still going out to Muslims in dreams, to prisoners nursing their dashed hopes and fruitless failures, and to our addicted and oppressed neighbors. More than ever this message of joy is called for. Who will enter the fray? Who will go?

Appendix 1:

Ten top stories of persecution against Christians (*Compass Direct*, Jan. 2007)

1. Silent Waves of Persecution in Iran
2. Eritrea Tightens Noose on Christians (over 2,000 imprisoned)
3. Christians Targeted in Iraq ("The body of the clergyman, identified only as 69-year-old Elder Munthir, was found on a Mosul street on November 30 with a single bullet to the head. The kidnappers had said by telephone that they would "kill all the Christians, and we will start with him." In October, Muslim kidnappers abducted and beheaded a Syrian Orthodox priest, leaving his corpse in an outlying suburb of Mosul.")
4. Islamic Rage Triggered by Cartoon: ("In Nigeria, Catholic priest Matthew Gajere of St. Rita's Catholic Church in Maiduguri, Borno state, and 50 other Christians were killed on February 18 when Muslims extremists enraged by the caricatures burned 31 churches in Maiduguri and Katsina state. Rioters also torched the residence of the bishop of Maiduguri diocese. On February

- 23, Muslims angry over the cartoons killed 10 Christians and set ablaze nine churches in Kontagora, Niger state.”)
5. Muslims confess to beheading Christian girls in Indonesia (“Police had searched in vain for the perpetrators of the attacks until May of this year, when seven Islamic terrorists confessed to the beheadings. On November 20, the parents of the slain girls met with the defendants, and one mother said she was ready to pardon them. The families embraced the terrorists and shook hands as a sign of peace.”)
 6. Hindu Campaign against Christian mission in Rajasthan, India
 7. Islamic Violence hits Classrooms in Nigeria
 8. Pastor Zhang Rongliang sentenced in Henan, China (China for Christ House Church Movement)
 9. Continued Restrictions and persecution in Vietnam (18 of 534 Hmong Churches that applied for registration were approved)
 10. Persecution in Afghanistan grows (“We are Muslims, and becoming a Christian is against our laws,” the prosecutor reportedly said. “He must get the death penalty.”)

Appendix 2

Prayer to Our Lady of the Sacred Heart

*Remember,
 Our Lady of the Sacred Heart,
 the great things the Lord has done for you.
 He chose you for his Mother.
 He wanted you close to his cross.
 He gives you a share in his glory.
 He listens to your prayer.
 Offer him our prayers of praise and thanksgiving;
 present our petitions to him.
 Let us live like you
 in the love of your Son
 that his Kingdom may come.
 Lead all men
 to the source of living water
 that flows from his heart,
 spreading over the world
 hope and salvation
 justice and peace.
 See our trust in you;
 answer our prayer.
 Show yourself always our Mother.*

Scott W. Sunquist
 January, 2007
 Princeton, NJ