The Sonship of Christ in the Contexts of Mission: Chalcedonian Retrieval as Missiological Necessity among Muslims

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From its earliest days, Christianity is a faith that has demonstrated its ability to be articulated, believed, and practiced in a multitude of cultural contexts. Its Scriptures have been translated into a multitude of languages, and its manifestations have appeared in countless places and eras. The task of the Christian missionary, then, is the translation of the unchanging message of the gospel into the changing contexts of the world in a perennial dance requiring exegesis of both text and context. To avoid the imposition of extra-contextual interpretive pressure, some missionaries and global theologians encourage the development of contextual Christologies that prioritize concepts and terms relevant and native to the culture over biblical or creedal terminology. To the contrary, this article contends that the Chalcedonian articulation of the Sonship of the second person of the trinity has enduring cross-cultural relevance for contemporary Christian missiology.

Key Words: Chalcedon, Christology, contextualization, Divine Filial Terms, Insider Movement, missiology, Muslim Idiom Translation, retrieval

Stephen Bevans begins his influential book *Models of Contextual Theology* with a jarring claim. The first sentence of the first chapter reads, "There is no such thing as 'theology'; there is only *contextual* theology."[1] Bevans goes on to provide examples of this claim by listing different adjectives that precede various theological programs, such as *African* theology, *feminist* theology, and *liberation* theology. Bevans's book illustrates a common understanding among missionaries approaching new cultural contexts, languages, and peoples: the missionary task is successful when it results in the Christian message being expressed in the cultural forms

native to the context.[2]

As he presents various models of contextual theology, Bevans provides a broad representation of the contemporary discussion concerning the articulation and application of biblical theology in the process of contextualization. In the first chapter he concludes,

> *Contextualization* points to the fact that theology needs to interact and dialogue not only with traditional cultural value, but with social change, new ethnic identities, and the conflicts that are present as the contemporary phenomenon of globalization encounters the various peoples of the world.[3]

In other words, the aim of the contextualization process is to apply the biblical message within a cultural context.[4] Thus, missionaries often labor to excise extrabiblical forms and influences that attend the biblical message in order to remove any foreign imposition on contextual reception.

In practice, this desire to mitigate foreign imposition on embryonic indigenous theologies encourages missionaries to refrain from introducing contemporary theological forms and conclusions from the missionary's home culture. At times, however, this desire also breeds skepticism regarding the formative early years of Christian history. Having become suspicious of the impact of extrabiblical culture on early theological articulations of Christian orthodoxy, some missionaries dismiss the importance of creedal precision surrounding central doctrines, contending, "Even within Christianity there are many different understandings about Jesus and about salvation. There is no one voice within Christianity about the Trinity. Some believe in it and some don't."[5] From such a posture of skepticism, some missiologists develop a wariness to introduce classical orthodox doctrines regarding issues as central as the Sonship of Christ.

This article does not dispute the fact that the peoples of the world must learn to understand and apply biblical teaching within their own context. Cultural translatability is a hallmark of the Christian faith and

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[1] Stephan Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2017), 3.

[2] See, e.g., Paul Hiebert, *Transforming Worldviews* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2009), 11. Hiebert introduces his book with the assertion, "The church in each locale, as a community of faith, must define what it means to be Christian in its particular sociocultural and historical setting."

[3] Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology*, 27 (emphasis original).

[4] See A. Scott Moreau, *Contextualization in World Missions* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2012), 18–19.

[5] Jan Prenger, *Muslim Insider Christ Followers* (Pasadena, CA: William Carey, 2017), 281. Cited here is an interviewee from Southeast Asia who is introduced as one who questions anyone's right to judge whether another group's theology is correct or not.

message.[6] Indeed, the missionary task *must* consider how the biblical message will appropriate the forms and language of a given culture in order to be understood and to belong uniquely therein.[7] What this article intends to demonstrate, however, is that imbalanced attention to the immediate cultural expression of the faith can lead to unwitting dismissal of the hard-wrought theological insights and accomplishments of the church throughout the ages to the degree that even biblical language is altered. In particular, this article contends that the Chalcedonian articulation of the Sonship of the second person of the trinity has cross-cultural relevance in contemporary Christian missiology. The test case for this thesis will be an investigation of Muslim Idiom Translations (MIT) of the Bible that remove Divine Filial Language (DFL)—references to God the Father and God the Son—in favor of terms that are less offensive to a Muslim audience.

Before considering the role that Chalcedonian Christology can play in contemporary contextualization discussions, we need to consider the idea of contextualization itself. Of particular interest are the various iterations of contextualization known as Insider Movements (IM). Following this overview, we will consider three broad missiological missteps that lead certain IM strategies to a willingness to remove the language of Son of God from Bible translations aimed at Muslim populations. Finally, then, we will consider how Chalcedonian Christology provides a corrective to all three missiological missteps—while demanding the retention of Divine Filial Language —as it articulates the biblical person and work of Jesus as the incarnate Son of God. First, then, let us address the missiological process of contextualization.

Contextual Christianity and the Insider Movement

That the cross-cultural communication of the biblical message will result in various culturally-shaped expressions of Christian faith and practice is hardly a new or controversial statement. Since 1974, the word contextualization has featured prominently within evangelical discussions

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[6] Lamin Sanneh, *Translating the Message: The Missionary Impact on Culture* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2001).

[7] Moreau, *Contextualization in World Missions*, 19, writes, "With thousands of ethnolinguistic groups, many with dialects and subcultural segments, the need to enable the Christian faith to be at home in each is a testimony to the need for contextualization."

about cross-cultural missions.[8] Drawing on Rev 7:9–10 and its eschatological vision of a multitude of people from every tribe, tongue, and nation worshipping around the throne, Byang Kato was perhaps the first evangelical to use the term when he said, "Since the Gospel message is inspired but the mode of its expression is not, contextualization of the modes of expression is not only right but necessary."[9] Contextualization has been widely acknowledged as a necessary and desirable aspect of missiology, though its particular applications are often debated.[10]

One debated aspect of contextualization that is particularly germane to the discussion of contextual Christology comes from the question of whether indigenous reflection on Scripture should develop its own theology from the ground up or build upon the theological conclusions of broader historical Christian orthodoxy.[11] Resisting the imposition of extra-cultural and extrabiblical material on a given context, some missiologists argue that extrabiblical theological resources—including the early creeds and councils—are unhelpful in fostering local, indigenous theologies because such creeds and councils are indelibly formed by the foreign cultural contexts in which they arose.[12] This sentiment characterizes some of the expressions of contextualization known as Insider Movements

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[8] See, e.g., David Hesselgrave and Edward Rommen, *Contextualization: Meanings, Methods, and Models* (Pasadena, CA: William Carey, 1989); Gailyn Van Rheenen, ed., *Contextualization and Syncretism: Navigating Cultural Currents* (Pasadena, CA: William Carey, 2006); Moreau, *Contextualization in World Missions*; Jackson Wu, *One Gospel for All Nations* (Pasadena, CA: William Carey, 2015).

[9] As quoted in Moreau, *Contextualization in World Missions*, 19.

[10] Moreau, *Contextualization in World Missions*, 19, writes, "Contextualization is at the mixing point of gospel and culture. It is not surprising then that the literature on contextualization has exploded over the past two decades. The sheer volume of writing, thinking, and experimenting with and about contextualization demonstrates its importance in mission." See also note 7 for several books that summarize and categorize contextualization models.

[11] See notes 4 and 5 above. Prenger, *Muslim Insider Christ Followers*, provides multiple examples of the impulse to reject outside forms and influence on the task of doing theology within a specific cultural context. See also William Dyrness, *Insider Jesus* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2016); Harley Talman and John Travis, eds., *Understanding Insider Movements* (Pasadena, CA: William Carey, 2015); and Steven Bevans, *Essays in Contextual Theology* (New York: Brill, 2018), 47–59.

[12] See the inclusion of Andrew Walls, "The Gospel as Prisoner and Liberator of Culture," in *Understanding Insider Movements*, ed. Harley Talman and John Travis (Pasadena, CA: William Carey, 2015), 305–15.

(IM). These IMs are at the center of our present investigation.[13]

In a recent effort to define the central theological and missiological approaches of those who advocate for various streams of Insider Movement contextualization, a compilation of articles was published under the title *Understanding Insider Movements*.[14] Included among its contributions is an article by Andrew Walls entitled "The Gospel as Prisoner and Liberator of Culture." In this article, Walls presents a view of Christian history and theology that is representative of many of the IM advocates who likewise contributed to the volume. Walls invites his readers to imagine an observer of Christian history who visits the early church and hears their discussions about Jesus of Nazareth whom they describe as the "Son of Man," the "Messiah," and "the Suffering Servant." Skipping ahead chronologically, the visitor returns in AD 325 to encounter Christians preferring a different set of appellatives to refer to Jesus: "Son of God" and "Lord." Furthermore, the Christians of AD 325 are also occupied with extra-biblical language as they engage in an intense discussion over "whether the Son is *homo-ousios* with the Father or only *homoi-ousios* with him."[15]

Walls's parable continues to address later moments in history, but already his point is sufficiently clear: each iteration of Christian expression utilizes and produces language and theological reflection derived from its own particular time and questions. Walls goes on to conclude, "No group of Christians has therefore any right to impose in the name of Christ upon another group of Christians a set of assumptions about life determined by another time and place."[16] Walls's article, included in the *Understanding Insider Movements* volume, provides a glimpse into the posture that IM advocates often take toward the developments of the church throughout history. While few would dispute the importance of the creeds and councils as appropriate expressions of faith for their time and place, the idea that such creeds and councils are beneficial for faithful missionary encounter with new contexts is rejected.[17] From this posture towards church

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[13] There is no singular movement that can be identified as "The Insider Movement." Rather, Insider Movement language describes a broad approach to contextualization that promotes the retention of cultural forms including non-Christian socio-religion forms and identity as vehicles for expressing genuine faith in Jesus.

[14] Talman and Travis, *Understanding Insider Movements*.

[15] Walls, "The Gospel as Prisoner and Liberator of Culture," 305–7.

[16] Walls, "The Gospel as Prisoner and Liberator of Culture," 309.

[17] Prenger, *Muslim Insider Christ Followers,* 119, states, "Those opposing IM seem to think of themselves as promoting the historical approach, and in that sense they are 'traditionalists' who promote traditional church doctrines and creeds."

history, IM strategies encourage fresh articulations of biblical truth in each new context rather than introducing the extrabiblical conclusions of ecumenical councils and creeds.

Central to the issue of contextualization among Muslims is the question of how to discuss and develop Christology. Muslims recognize Jesus as a prophet who is highly praised within the Qur'an and Islamic tradition, yet they adamantly reject both his divinity and his role as the Son of God.[18] Contemporary missiological discussions surrounding the presentation of Christ among Muslims exhibit a spectrum of opinions and positions. On one end of the spectrum, some missiologists advocate for recognizing that the mosaic of biblical imagery used to describe Jesus allows one to give initial preference to imagery that provides culturally appropriate entry-points into the discussion that will eventually include a robust biblical portrait of Christ. Timothy Tennent, for example, employs the analogy of a puzzle with many pieces that combine together to create the full biblical portrait of Jesus.[19] Though initial evangelistic preference might be given to explaining Jesus using less offensive biblical imagery, the process of doing Christology involves putting the rest of the biblical puzzle pieces together, including even the offensive aspects of a biblically holistic portrait of Christ.

On the other end of the spectrum, however, some IM advocates argue that the biblical portrait of Jesus as the Son of God is unacceptable and offensive to Muslim audiences and should therefore be jettisoned altogether in order to accommodate their sensibilities.[20] This sentiment manifests itself not only in shaping missionary strategy and practice, but also

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[18] Ex. Qur'an 3:45. See also, John Kaltner and Younus Mirza, *The Bible and the Qur'an: Biblical Figures in Islamic Tradition* (London: T&T Clark, 2018), 76–83. For analysis of the Qur'anic Christ figure, see Matthew Bennett, "Christ in the Scripture of Islam: Remnantal Revelation or Irredeemable Imposter?," *STR* 11.1 (Spring 2020): 99–117.

[19] Timothy Tennent, *Theology in the Context of World Christianity: How the Global Church Is Influencing the Way We Think about and Discuss Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007), 107.

[20] See the suggestions regarding the removal of Divine Filial Language presented in the influential article by Rick Brown, "Part 1: Explaining the Biblical Term 'Son(s) of God' in Muslim Context," *International Journal of Frontier Missiology* 22.3 (2005): 91–96. Not all who argue for a change away from "Son of God" language do so out of a desire to avoid offense. Some have argued that the language of "Son of God" literally rendered in Arabic cannot help but convey a sense of sexual generation, and should be altered in order to better express the meaning within the context. See Rick Brown, Leith Gray, and Andrea Gray, "A New Look at Translating Familial Biblical Terms," *International Journal of Frontier Missiology* 28.3 (2011): 105–20.

in the publication of what are considered Muslim Idiom Translations (MIT) of Scripture.[21] Some of these MITs omit the divine references to God as Son and Father altogether.[22]

Some readers may be tempted to dismiss such MITs as anomalous expressions of extreme contextualization efforts. However, before coming to the conclusion that these MITs represent isolated streams of missiology, it is fruitful to inspect some of the broader missiological commitments that have allowed for these expressions of contextualization to result. By inspecting these commitments, the following section will prepare us to consider how retrieving Chalcedonian Christology for missiological purposes helps to foster indigenous expressions of Christology that also retain orthodoxy.

Inspecting Three Missiological Missteps that Lead to MITs

The production of Bible translations that remove references to the Son of God did not occur in a vacuum. Multiple factors have contributed to the decisions IM proponents made regarding the Christologies promoted within Islamic contexts. In order to discern the origins of MIT fruits, we must inspect the missiological roots. Specifically, the following section inspects three missteps that paved the way for MITs that remove Sonship language: contextually-informed theological method, dynamic equivalence translation theory, and missiological pragmatism.

Inspecting Theological Method: Christ from Above and Christ from Below

One aspect of contextualization discussions that requires inspection is the desire to see Christ described and understood in the cultural forms of the new context. Resulting from this desire, some theologians have adopted a two-tiered theological method of developing global Christology using the idea of a Christology "from above" and a Christology "from below."[23] This distinction separates the realities related to Christ's person and ontology ("above") from Christ's work and accomplishments in history ("below").[24] Timothy Tennent provides an example of this distinction in practice as he inspects various contextual Christologies around the globe.

As Tennent embraces this distinctive method of developing indigenous Christology, he reframes the discussion around elements that he believes to be missing from the conclusions of the Chalcedonian Creed (AD 451). Arguing that global Christological reflection should result in an ever-growing Christology that includes contextual imagery and elements, Tennent writes,

> The council of Chalcedon was looking at the Christological puzzle from the upper side, that is, from the divine perspective of God's initiative in becoming a man. They did not deliberate or discuss how the incarnation is understood from the perspective of, for example, fifth-century Persian Christians, who, at the time of this council, were being persecuted for their faith in Christ.[25]

While Tennent is quick to state that all christological proposals should be chastened by "the reflections that have stood the test of time and many generations of Christians," he goes on to list several contextual Christologies that supplement biblical Christology with extra-biblical imagery. Tennent comments, "[African Christologies] tend to focus more on Jesus' work than on his person in isolation."[26] In other words, the impulse to develop an ever-broadening contextual Christology "from below" encourages contextual theologians to develop portraits of a "Contextual Jesus" that draw on existing cultural categories to explain Jesus's biblical identity through his work.

Yet, as the following investigation of Chalcedon will demonstrate, Christological reflection on Christ's work cannot be separated from an articulation of his person. Both require the theologian to wrestle with the biblical language that informs the biblical picture of Christ's person and work as the incarnate Son of God. While Tennent himself has written convincingly and helpfully against many of the contextualization errors of IM advocates, his two-tiered approach to theological method represents one of the missiological missteps that can lead IM advocates to argue for contextual Christologies that utilize contextual categories at the expense of biblical language to express the person and work of Christ.[27]

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[21] See the assessment of such MITs by Adam Simnowitz, "Appendix: Do Muslim Idiom Translations Islamize the Bible? A Glimpse behind the Veil," in *Muslim Conversions to Christ*, ed. Ayman Ibrahim and Ant Greenham (New York: Peter Lang, 2018), 501–23.

[22] See Simnowitz, "Appendix," 510. Simnowitz demonstrates how two different MITs translate the reference to "the Son" in Heb 1:8 as "God's beloved" (*Injil Sharif*, 2001) and "the beloved prince" (*Al-Injil*, 2013).

[23] Millard Erickson, *The Word Became Flesh: A Contemporary Incarnational Christology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1991), 11.

[24] Tennent, *Theology in the Context of World Christianity*, 113.

[25] Tennent, *Theology in the Context of World Christianity*, 108.

[26] Tennent, *Theology in the Context of World Christianity*, 113.

[27] Timothy Tennent, "Followers of Jesus (Isa) in Islamic Mosques," *International Journal of Frontier Missiology* 23.3 (Fall 2006): 101–15.

If Christology can be done "from below" and focused on Christ's work in forms that are contextually communicative and which meet contextual needs, then communicating the work of Christ can be supplemented with contextual terminology that is descriptive of Jesus's work apart from the biblical language. When such biblical language is contextually offensive—as in the case of Muslim aversion to Son of God language—the temptation arises to highlight the "Christology from below" to the neglect of the biblical language. This is precisely the path advocates of IM strategies and MITs take that omits Divine Filial Language from their translations.[28] As this article investigates the Chalcedonian contribution, more attention will be given to Tennent's two-tiered methodological proposal. For the present, however, it is important to inspect another aspect of contextualization discussions that has served to lay the foundation for MITs and IM strategies: receptor-oriented translation theories which defer to cultural preferences and linguistic forms.

Inspecting Translation Theory: Receptor Oriented Language

Between 2011 and 2012, the broader evangelical world became aware of the controversial trend of developing MITs within some Muslim-centered missions strategies and among key translation agencies.[29] Long before this controversy, however, Christian anthropologists such as Charles Kraft began teaching that "accurate translation[s] must produce the same *emotive* response in the reader of the target language as it did to the reader of the original language."[30] Pertinent to our purposes in this article, Kraft illustrates this impact with the specific example of removing the phrase "Son of God" from translations of Scripture read by Muslim audiences. Georges Houssney narrates an exchange with Kraft in which Kraft explained,

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[28] For example, see Harley Talman, "Reflections on Religion," in *Understanding Insider Movements*, ed. Harley Talman and John Travis (Pasadena, CA: William Carey, 2015), 342–44, who argues that much Christianity defines who is in and who is out by way of a "checklist" of orthodoxy which "invariably become instruments of power." Thus, we should eschew the "checklist" mentality and instead be willing to embrace a more pliable "family resemblance" approach in which followers of Jesus might not check all of our boxes of orthodoxy—including Jesus's divinity and eternal Sonship.

[29] Georges Houssney, "Watching the Insider Movement Unfold," in *Muslim Conversions to Christ*, ed. Ayman Ibrahim and Ant Greenham (New York: Peter Lang, 2018), 402–7.

[30] C. Richard Shumaker, ed., *Conference on Media in Islamic Culture Report* (Clearwater, FL: International Christian Broadcasters, 1974), 33. As described by Houssney, "Watching the Insider Movement Unfold," 398 (emphasis original).

Muslims object to the sonship of Christ and misunderstand it; therefore, we must not offend them, but rather give them a phrase that they can accept.… "sonship is an analogy, metaphor, it's an example, there's nothing sacred in either that term or that concept."[31]

Seen here in the transcript of this 1974 conference, Kraft proposed the removal of Divine Filial Language (DFL) in order to accommodate Muslim audiences. Much to Houssney's surprise, the idea was not rejected out of hand, but rather many people found Kraft's suggestions both appropriate for avoiding offense and pragmatically fruitful within their ministries.[32]

In the early 2000s, other missiologists working with Muslims continued to propagate Kraft's ideas for removing offensive phrases and terminology from the Bible. Among the most influential advocates was Rick Brown. Brown wrote an article in the *International Journal of Frontier Missions* in 2000 entitled "The 'Son of God': Understanding Jesus's Messianic Titles."[33] In this article Brown falsely contends that, in the Arabic language "the words for son and father have a biological meaning only. The terms are not used broadly or metaphorically for other interpersonal relationships, not even for a nephew, step-son, or an adopted son, and certainly not for the king's subjects nor for God's people."[34] Not only is this statement objectively false, but it also implies that other languages *do* regularly use son and father in ways that stretch beyond biological relationships.[35] Even more troubling, Kraft's comments regarding the biblical language used to reveal God to humanity imply that DFL is imprecise, does not

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[31] Houssney, "Watching the Insider Movement Unfold," 399. The latter quotation is cited by Houssney as being drawn from Shumaker, *Conference on Media in Islamic Culture Report*, 68.

[32] Houssney, "Watching the Insider Movement Unfold," 399.

[33] Rick Brown, "The 'Son of God': Understanding Jesus's Messianic Titles," *IJFM* 17.1 (Spring 2000): 41–52.

[34] Brown, "The 'Son of God,'" 41.

[35] The statement is false because Arabic speakers do regularly refer to friends and younger men as "my son" [*ya ibni*] in idiomatic fashion despite the lack of biological relationship between the two parties. Furthermore, there are two words in Arabic that connote sonship. The standard rendering of the phrase "Son of God" that is used in the Van Dyck version of the Arabic Bible is *ibn Allah*. The other word for son is *walad* which is not used to refer to the second person of the Trinity and which does more closely relate to the process of being born, thus more closely indicating biological reproduction and the implication of prior sexual activity.

play a definitive role in describing and defining God, and can be exchanged without doing violence to biblical revelation.[36]

Inspecting Missiological Pragmatism: Avoiding Offense and Winning a Hearing

For many readers, the idea of removing biblical language from a translation is likely a shocking and untenable suggestion. However, if one is convinced that Christology from below is advantageous for producing new and culturally appropriate theological images, such a leap is not as dramatic as it may seem. Once one has determined that the task of missions is ultimately fulfilled when a people has begun speaking about Jesus in terminology that is native to their context, moving from adding imagery to subtracting biblical language is not so difficult.[37] If one encounters aspects of biblical teaching that either fail to connect with the context or actively offend them, it is not difficult to downplay or even remove those aspects that do not readily exhibit themselves in the cultural environment in which one is working.

If one is keen to see Muslims consider the gospel in their context, the tendency to remove barriers of offense provides pragmatic motivation for sidelining Sonship in the development of Muslim-sensitive Christology. While the motivations for such an approach may be admirable, the biblical-theological argument is untenable. The following section intends to demonstrate how the task of retrieving Chalcedonian Christology addresses the three areas of investigation above.

The Need for Chalcedonian Retrieval

The preceding section sufficiently demonstrated the role that cultural context often plays in the task of doing theology globally. Such a focus on the local context may prove to generate or manufacture a more immediately favorable response to the message that is presented. However, as in the case of MITs that remove DFL, it does so at the expense of presenting the entire biblical portrait of Christ. It is precisely at this juncture that being grounded in church history and historical theology can provide a corrective to this historically uprooted missiological trajectory while also allowing the biblical Christ to take root in local soil.

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[36] Shumaker, *Conference on Media in Islamic Culture Report*, 68.

[37] See Donald McGavaran, *The Bridges of God* (New York: Friendship, 1955), 14–15. McGavaran writes, "Positively, a people is discipled when its individuals feel united around Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour … the full understanding of Christ is not the all-important factor, which is simply that He be recognized by the community as their sole spiritual Sovereign."

Mere Christology: The Incarnate Son in the Context(s) of Chalcedon

As we have mentioned briefly thus far, some missions practitioners view patristic theology as a contextually-contained set of theological judgments that are helpful to a point, but not necessary for cross-cultural engagement. We will primarily address Tennent's argument more fully below, because it is subtly problematic on its own and also opens the door to what we perceive as the clearer Christological errors of some IM advocates and the removal of DFL in MITs. In particular, we will show that Tennent's argument for an expanding "Christological puzzle" as it relates to creedal Christological formulations is both historically and theologically thin.

First, as was mentioned above, Tennent insinuates that those involved in the Chalcedonian Council were not concerned with their Persian brothers and sisters who were being persecuted. Of course, this assertion is an assertion from silence—we cannot argue that they were unconcerned with Persian persecution simply because they were focused on various concerns related to Christological heresy. More pointedly, to assume that the council's attendees were not concerned about any ideas or events outside of the council's main discussion is quite the accusation given that over 500 bishops from across the West and East convened for the council. The council did not directly address these persecution issues because this was not its intent, and making this point about Chalcedon does nothing to advance Tennent's argument about the *Christological* conclusions and intentions of the council.

Second and more importantly for our purposes, Tennent asserts that the councils such as Nicaea (AD 325) and Chalcedon "did more to declare which pieces were *not* true pieces of the puzzle and should be discarded, than to provide a final, definitive statement of christology that would silence all future discussions."[38] This claim is demonstrably false. Tennent admits that these councils sought to rule out the theological conclusions of Arius, Nestorius, and Eutyches; however, this admission undermines his point because it highlights the councils' method of bringing together bishops from across global contexts *to make unified statements that addressed multiple contextual-theological concerns*. Chalcedon, in its own words, is bookended by a desire to continue the *scriptural* and *ecclesial* consensus handed down to the early church as a response to these various heresies from across multiple centuries and global contexts:

> We, then, following the holy Fathers, all with one consent, teach people to confess one and the same Son … as the prophets from

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[38] Tennent, *Theology in the Context of Christianity*, 107 (emphasis original).

the beginning have declared concerning Him, and the Lord Jesus Christ Himself has taught us, and the Creed of the holy Fathers has handed down to us.

The creeds in general and Chalcedon in particular were certainly responding to specific contextual events concerning various disparate theologies, but they were able to identify and correct these theologies with the same singular conclusion by virtue of an established general "pro-Nicene" consensus that developed particularly by the time of the Council of Constantinople (AD 381).[39] Put another way, the fact that Chalcedon sought to address a wide range of disparate theologies from across Christendom shows that the council's intentions and perspective were more far reaching and ambitious than Tennent depicts. In fact, the emperor Marcian, who oversaw the proceedings, hoped that its "judgments may be observed forever," and the bishops lauded that their conclusions were "unerring," "contained everything," and "dictated by the Holy Spirit."[40] Rather than accusing Chalcedon of attempting to utilize culturally-bound language and categories to satisfy culturally-determined concerns, the Council of Chalcedon attempted to wrestle with the biblical portrait of the incarnate Son of God in order to establish a mere Christology that could be articulated and affirmed throughout the world regardless of culture and language.

While the Protestant may quibble with the idea of Spirit-inspired creeds, the larger point is that the patristic theologians did not leave their conclusions in contextually-situated moments, but rather sought to establish fundamental, biblically-faithful, and timeless criteria for the Church catholic (universal) on how to talk about Christ, so that these creedal judgments would serve Christians as a theological anchor moving forward. Indeed, if their conclusions are rooted in biblical language and deductions, then any affirmation of divine revelation would render them timeless even

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[39] Lewis Ayres, *Nicaea and Its Legacy: An Approach to Fourth-Century Trinitarian Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 236–40, identifies three "central principles" of pro-Nicene theology: "1. a clear version of the person and nature distinction, entailing the principle that whatever is predicated of the divine nature is predicated of the three persons equally and understood to be one (this distinction may or may not be articulated via a consistent terminology); 2. clear expression that the eternal generation of the Son occurs within the unitary and incomprehensible divine nature; 3. clear expression of the doctrine that the persons work inseparably." Mark S. Smith, *The Idea of Nicaea in the Early Church and Councils, AD 431–451* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 200–201 notes that Chalcedon was both viewed as a "second Nicaea" and "was itself a distinct conciliar moment in an ongoing narrative of orthodoxy."

[40] Smith, *The Idea of Nicaea*, 201; cf. *ACO* II.1.2., 124 and 140–41.

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if certain contexts demand different starting points.

Retrieving Patristic Christology

Not only does Tennent overlook the breadth of cultural representation at Chalcedon, but he argues that the Christological task is best conceived of as an ever-expanding project. He uses phrases such as "indigenous African Christology" to discuss the need for a contextually-situated "contribution" to the "Christological puzzle" by modern Africans who are separated by time and space from earlier Christological formulations.[41] Tennent defends the necessity of such a unique contribution of indigenous theologies by noting that the "genuine and helpful insights" of the eyewitnesses of Christ himself recorded in Scripture are important, but "even those Christological reflections that stand the test of Scripture and time cannot be used to declare a moratorium on Christological reflection."[42]

One of the chief ways he arrives at this conclusion is by noting that the creeds, for example, are more concerned with the *person* of Christ than the *work* of Christ[43] and, further, "even if we accept, as the *sensus communis* has, that every single piece Chalcedon placed into Christological puzzle was a perfect fit," creeds are still unable to address every complexity that could arise in contextual situations.[44] So, "A complete Christology (if it is even possible) must surely be the work of many generations of faithful Christians, not merely the work of a particular council."[45] Even if we grant certain propositional phrases about Christ, it seems that Tennent then sees the experiential *work* of Christ as multivalent and not static.

Chalcedonian Contribution: Text-Controlled Theological Method

Space does not allow us to address all the issues raised above in relation to divine revelation, the closed canon of Scripture, and appeals to subjective experience.[46] Instead, we want to show that these concerns were met by the logic and argumentation given by patristic theologians

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[41] Tennent, *Theology in the Context of Christianity*, 109.

[42] Tennent, *Theology in the Context of Christianity*, 111.

[43] Tennent, *Theology in the Context of Christianity*, 107.

[44] Tennent, *Theology in the Context of Christianity*, 108.

[45] Tennent, *Theology in the Context of Christianity*, 108.

[46] In fairness to Tennent, his chapter on Bibliology discusses the issues of canonicity such that it is clear that he values a closed, well-defined canon of Scripture; cf. Tennent, *Theology in the Context of Christianity*, 53–75. However, his proposal of an ever-expanding Christological puzzle leaves the door of discussion regarding a closed canon suspiciously and problematically ajar.

and to affirm more objectively Tennent's own contention: "every generation must learn to recognize the heresies of its day as well as the previously rejected heresies that, from time to time, get represented for fresh consideration."[47] Yes and amen. However, we assert that seeking to expand Christological definitions based on unique indigenous reflections can breed disastrous results, ranging from violence to the biblical text itself to encouraging modified Bible translations that are palatable to certain contexts. Instead, missions work should retrieve patristic Christology as an objective way to "recognize the heresies of its day" in order to bring their pagan theologies back to the fundamental scriptural deductions. The patristic theologians, hundreds of years after John wrote his Gospel, zeroed in on Sonship language precisely because they viewed the biblical presentation of the Son as paramount to his eternal identity. While language could have been changed to fit their contexts—for example, they could have changed the language to fit Greek philosophies about Zeus's sons—they were rigorously biblical. Thus, regardless of context, they could not ignore the clear theological implications for the Christ's sonship, including but not limited to his eternal generation, his ability to give us the Father's inheritance as the firstborn, and the work of adoption as sons through the Son.

Given that these creedal affirmations were drawn from centuries of varying contextual engagement with heretical Christologies, the incalculable number of heresies encountered on the mission field until Jesus returns will almost certainly be boiled down to the same basic denials of Scripture's portrayal of the Son's person and work—items addressed pointedly and succinctly in the biblical text and summarized in the creeds. The first few centuries of Christological reflection show that almost immediately early Christians drew on similar Christological principles regardless of their opponents, drawing these opponents back to scriptural truths. Two examples from church history must suffice as a way forward.

Chalcedonian Contribution: Language, Culture, and Translation

A brief background to Chalcedon starts with the earliest reflections of theologians in the second century through the fifth century. Indeed, the Son as the *Logos* (λόγος) of God (John 1) was a central point of debate in the early church. This *logos* idea had roots in Greek thought (wisdom, learning, philosophy, divine insight), but it was also related to the idea of God's word or wisdom in the OT. Though swaths of biblical texts were

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[47] Tennent, *Theology in the Context of Christianity*, 108. He includes "heresies" such as materialism in his discussion, but we want to focus more specifically on his Christological formulations.

used in patristic theological formulations, John 1 alone provided unalterable Sonship language that filled up creedal affirmations. He is God and is with God; light from light; incarnate; et al. Two examples leading up to Chalcedon must suffice as we consider whether Chalcedon was an isolated theological-contextual incident or a larger "mere" Christology built on biblical and traditional language of Sonship.

Second-century theologian Justin Martyr, perhaps the first great apologist in the early church, wrote treatises against both Greeks and Jews with respect to this idea. In his *Apologies*, Justin notably used Stoic and Platonic ideas to build an apologetic for Christ from John 1: the same *logos* the Greeks ("pagans") spoke of appeared in the person of Jesus Christ ("the Word"). Further, he noted, Greek heroes such as Mercury ("the announcing word of God"), Jupiter's sons ("who suffered"), and Perseus ("born of a virgin") resemble Jesus in certain ways, but "as we have already proved … He is their superior."[48] In this way, Justin elevates Jesus higher than the Greek philosophies by personifying the *Logos* and painting him as the true and better *Logos* over and against their mythological heroes. Put another way, he did not fold his Christology into an "indigenous" Greek philosophy, but rather brought their native terms and understanding back to the unique relationship between the Father and Son as displayed in Scripture:

> No proper name has been bestowed upon God, the Father of all, since He is unbegotten.… But His Son, who alone is properly called Son, the Word, who was with Him [God the Father] and was begotten before all things, when in the beginning He [God, the Father] created and arranged all things through him [the Son].[49]

In his engagement with a Jewish man named Trypho, Justin asserted that Israel's Scriptures are "not yours, but ours"[50] because, "If your ears were not so dull, or your hearts so hardened, you would see that the words refer to our Jesus."[51] As many of the other apologists, Justin saw that Israel's God was always closely tied to his *Logos*, so Scripture's confession of Jesus the Son as the Word shows that he is inseparable from the Father as light from the sun.[52]

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[48] *1 Apol.* 22.

[49] *2 Apol.* 6.

[50] *Dial.* 29.

[51] *Dial.* 33.

[52] *Dial.* 128–29. Of course, we want to be careful to note that Justin was by no means a "pro-Nicene" theologian, given that he lived long before such a person could exist, but he nonetheless talked about Jesus's unique status as the Son and Word as the linchpin for arguments in various contextual and philosophical contexts.

As Athanasius sought to solidify the Nicene Creed in the fourth century as a universally-accepted statement across Christendom, he used *homoousios* (the Father and Son share the same substance/essence) as a central term and labeled various groups as "Arians" to describe their theologies, even if they were neither disciples of Arius nor agreed with Arius on every theological jot and tittle.[53] This helped him bring together varying contexts to a central affirmation about the Sonship of Christ by showing how these different heresies made a similar mistake theologically and exegetically. As G. L. Prestige notes, *hypostasis* was sometimes used interchangeably with *ousia* during the fourth century, depending on whether one was in the West or East.[54] For example, the Western church often used *hypostasis* "as a literal representation of the Latin [term] substantia."[55] These terms were used differently depending on the context, and we see this divide in *Tomas Ad Antiochenos*, written after the proceedings of the Council of Alexandria (362). This letter describes the distinctions among the presiding bishops, some of whom preferred to describe God as three *hypostases* (persons). Given that this language was also preferred by "Arians," the group assured Athanasius that they did not intend to say that there are three Gods or three sources but rather one Godhead and one source, in alignment with the Nicene confession of *homoousios*. On the other side, some spoke of one *hypostasis*, but they explained that they did not teach the Son and Spirit as merely names or unsubstantial qualities of the Father, but rather they were using *hypostasis* and *ousia* interchangeably.[56] Athanasius appears to have orchestrated a compromise between the two parties: "And all, by God's grace, and after the above

explanations, agree together that the faith confessed by the fathers at Nicaea is better than the said phrases, and that for the future they would prefer to be content to use its language."[57]

In short, Athanasius recognized that various contexts might start at different points depending on their particular contextual concerns, but ultimately was an ardent defender of Nicaea's scriptural conclusions and thus did not compromise on the core affirmations of the biblical data about the Son's unique relationship to the Father to mere contextuality; instead, he encouraged them to remain committed to a common core even as they worked out these issues in various contexts. As the aforementioned consensus emerged around the Council of Constantinople, the patristic theologians were already using Nicaea as a rallying point for Christological reflection, even as they encountered new heresies in the subsequent decades. The Chalcedonian creed, then, is built on this centuries-long commitment to the Sonship of Christ as the core, unchangeable biblical deduction.

Chalcedonian Contribution: The Person and Work of the Incarnate Son

Further, these patristic theologians did not recognize Tennent's distinction between the *person* and *work* of Christ as the Son. They viewed the Son's person and work as ontologically inseparable and reciprocal, located foundationally in the hypostatic union. Athanasius, for example, saw Arius's assertion that the Son is a creature and eternally begotten from the Father as a *worship* issue related to who Christ is *and* the work he had done. For example, if Christ is a creature, he is not divine and lacks the power to save; if he does not become incarnate, he lacks the ability to transfer salvation to mankind. As such, we should worship him as the Creator who has saved us.[58] The Sonship of Christ is not something that can be removed without doing violence to biblical Christology and soteriology. If Christ is not the eternal Son of the Father—as the biblical text affirms in myriad ways and the Christian tradition summarized in the creeds—he is not worthy of worship or able to save mankind from their sins. His Sonship is directly tied to his eternal relationship with the Father and thus implies that he is of the same nature. More than a mere ancestor, he is the unique, only-begotten Son who shares in all his Father has, which he gives to mankind in salvation. Thus, when one's contextual concerns lead to re-translating biblical texts to remove sonship language, for instance, it is not merely the words that are changed, but overarching biblical-theological

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[53] See, e.g., his elevation of Nicene formulations over the "Arian" conspiracies at other council proceedings in *Syn.* 14.3. For useful discussion on Athanasius's *homoousios* polemic against Arius, Aetius, et al., see Ayres, *Nicaea and Its Legacy*, 140–44. Smith, *The Idea of Nicaea*, 21, notes in particular Athanasius's motivation to use Nicaea as a battleground was likely due in part to his personal disdain for the way he was treated by the councils at Antioch (AD 341) and Sirmium (AD 351).

[54] G. L. Prestige, *God in Patristic Thought* (London: SPCK, 1964; repr., Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2008), 188. This led to the Nicene Creed using "one hypostasis" language. We note here that the so-called West/East divide can be wrongly exaggerated in these discussions, and we will attempt to avoid this tendency throughout the discussion.

[55] Prestige, *God in Patristic Thought*, 188.

[56] Prestige, God in Patristic Thought, 181–84, provides a helpful summary of this interaction. For a complementary summary, see R. P. C. Hanson, *The Search for the Christian Doctrine of God: The Arian Controversy, 318–381* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005), 639–45.

[57] *Tom.* 6.

[58] See, e.g., *Con. Ar.* 2.20–51.

themes related to salvation itself. Another Son, a soteriologically impotent Son who can be crafted and molded by context without regard to the ontological and economic implications, would be unworthy of global missionary effort.

Conclusion: The Role of Retrieval in Modern Missiology

As we have tried to demonstrate by retrieving Chalcedonian Christology, Christ's ontological equality with the Father as the eternally begotten Son is the *telos* of all Christological reflection because it is rooted in the most fundamental truths of Scripture. Abandoning, ignoring, or eclipsing the Sonship of Christ as formulated by the Chalcedonian council skews biblical language about Christ's immutable person and work, threatens to leave would-be converts in various contexts in their pagan religions covered by a "Christian" veneer, and ultimately wrongly assumes that the patristic period's reflection on Scripture has nothing definitive to say to the global church.

Despite the apparent deference to the global church, advocates for MITs often ignore the voices of national churches that protest against their methods. Those who advocate for removing DFL often argue from the conviction that local believers should be determining theological articulation rather than believers far removed from their context by time, geography, and culture. Yet such advocates face some of the strongest opposition to their approach from national churches where they are promoting their strategy. For instance, throughout the summer in 2020, various Egyptian churches and ministries such as the Bible Society of Egypt made public statements denouncing MITs as destructive and deviant.[59] In fact, those who advocate for such IM and MIT practices often ignore the considerable contextual insight of local Christians, neglecting to consider the enduring presence of Chalcedon-affirming Christian communities in Arab lands whose lives and ministries among their Muslim neighbors have not led them to hesitate to affirm or to abandon the biblical imagery of Sonship.[60] With Sidney Griffith, then, we would be wise to conclude that,

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[59] See the multiple statements compiled and translated by Adam Simnowitz, "Arabic-speaking Christians Condemn Muslim Idiom Translations & Liberal Commentaries Produced By Western Missions Agencies," *biblicalmissiology.org,* September 21, 2020, https://biblicalmissiology.org/2020/09/21/ arabic-speaking-christians-condemn-muslim-idiom-translations-liberal-commentaries-produced-by-western-missions-agencies/.

[60] In regard to the presence of a variety of Christian communities—including

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"Now is the time for Westerners to consider the lessons to be learned from the experience of the Christians who have lived in the world of Islam for centuries."[61] Unfortunately, however, under the guise of advocating for indigenous theological freedom, MIT proponents often ignore the insightful voices of local indigenous believers in favor of their own interpretations of the culture and their audience.

Missions is unavoidably a forward-looking endeavor. It requires savvy navigation of new environments, discerning assessment of alternative worldviews, and an ability to communicate meaningfully cross-culturally. Most who are involved in mission work are motivated to embrace the task due to a deep compassion for lost people to encounter and embrace Jesus. The chance to see someone understand, trust, and follow Jesus in a cultural context that is far different than one's own is in and of itself a testimony to the transcultural and timeless truth of the biblical gospel.

However, it is precisely the transcultural and timeless aspect of the truth of the gospel that requires a forward-looking missionary to recognize the historical roots and articulations of the message. That this message can be communicated, believed, and applied in various cultures does not divorce the message from the ways that it has been understood throughout time as prior saints have sought to articulate the central truths of biblical teaching. Furthermore, the labors of those saints were aimed at articulating timeless statements derived from the whole of the biblical text and in response to improper ways to read and understand it. Thus, even though the times, languages, and cultures today might be foreign to the patristic era, the likelihood that someone in an atheistic or pagan religion might make the same exegetical and interpretive mistakes as those that prompted the councils and creeds is almost certain. The time-tested answers that are represented in the creeds, councils, and patristic theologians, then, still have transcultural relevance today, in part because they

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Chalcedon-affirming Melkites—in the Hijaz at the onset of Islamic emergence, see Albert Hourani, *A History of the Arab Peoples* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991), 8–9. See also the work of Michael Philip Penn, *When Christians First Met Muslims* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2015); Garth Fowden, *Before and After Muhammad* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press 2014), 185–88. And in regards to the rich and lengthy Arabic-speaking Christian traditions of engaging Islam, see Sidney Griffith, *The Church in the Shadow of the Mosque* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2008), 177, who writes, "Later Arabophone Christian writers and thinkers up to the twelfth and thirteenth centuries in Egypt, collected, fine-tuned, and synthesized the apologetic and theological discourse of earlier Christian authors. After their time, and up to the twentieth century, for all practical purposes, the Arabic idiom of Christians under Muslim tule in the Middle East remained constant, but not frozen."

[61] Griffith, *The Church in the Shadow of the Mosque*, 179.

themselves were birthed out of centuries of cross-cultural, global contexts. More than that, they represent basic affirmations that exceed contextual boundaries.

When missionaries today dabble with the idea of developing new cultural Christologies derived more from cultural forms than from biblical reflection and historical rootedness, they begin to tread on the slippery slope that leads to the heresies of yesterday. While the application of biblical teaching will doubtlessly look different in different environments, core Christian doctrine has been well established and agreed upon by Christians from the far east, middle east, and near east who gathered throughout the first six centuries of the church from around the Roman Empire and beyond to consider the importance of clear articulation of biblical Christology.

The urgent desire to see fruitful communication and contextual application of the gospel notwithstanding, missiology cannot content itself to remain singularly focused on a forward-looking posture. Our argument throughout has been that we must not sacrifice the missiological importance of historical theology on the altar of urgent concern with present pragmatism. Following Tennent, some missionaries long to see indigenous Christologies emerge that will allow cultures to possess their own articulations of the person and work of Christ. On the other hand, missiologists such as Brown are willing to jettison biblical language in preference to less offensive imagery in order to see a greater response among their people. Both of these options appear to be motivated by good desires and pragmatic means of reaching those desires. But if we listen to the patristics on these issues, we recognize that the person and work of the incarnate Son cannot be separated from biblical categories and presentations without doing violence to Christ's ability to truly save.

Though the patristic theologians and creeds cited in this essay lived long before today's missiology, their warnings are vital to contemporary missionaries as they seek to present the timeless and transcultural message of Christ to which the Bible bears witness. Such historical rootedness allows present ministry to avoid the long-term dangers that the creeds and councils warn against. Pragmatism and cultural retention—though born of good motives—cannot be allowed to alter the essential importance of the biblical categories and helpful terminology that have been used throughout the history of the church to reflect the work of salvation that the Bible connects intimately with the nature of the Person who accomplished it. To neglect the great symphony of voices throughout the ages who have passed along the same message is to introduce discord into the melody played by the church catholic throughout the ages.

While we are sympathetic to the desire to be contextually-sensitive to theological, ecclesiological, or cultural barriers that arise in evangelistic scenarios, we should not confuse evangelism with Christology. Put another way, evangelistic efforts that seek to graft in indigenous imagery, as Tennant suggests, might be a starting point, but we must lead them eventually to the true Son of Scripture rather than preferring cultural norms to biblical language. To this point, John Behr emphasizes the symphonic effect of the patristic voices as he writes,

> At the beginning of the third book of *Against Heresies*, Irenaeus lists the succession of teachers in Rome, all of whom, he claims, have consistently taught the same, this is not cast in terms of maintaining, statically, an original deposit of teachings separate from the Scriptures, as those following in Lessing's wake would do, but that in their preaching, bound up as this is with the interpretation of Scripture, these figures were all part of the same symphony, with all the diachronic and synchronic diversity that this entails. This symphony is continuously unfolding and, moreover, it is public, in contrast to those who, from time to time, prefer to play their own tunes in private.[62]

Though the missionary task will inevitably introduce new instruments into the symphony, it is important to recognize that the music played on each instrument is the same tune. That tune is set by the biblical text, not the cultural context. Missions is inevitably forward looking, but it should never be blind to its past.

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[62] John Behr, *Irenaeus of Lyons: Identifying Christianity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 10.