

CHALICE INTRODUCTION TO
Disciples Theology

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PETER GOODWIN HELTZEL, ED.



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Preface

The *Chalice Introduction to Disciples Theology* could not have been published until now. It is not that the Stone–Campbell Movement, which early in its history shunned the word *theology*, has eschewed theology in practice. On the contrary, Barton W. Stone’s *An Address to the Christian Churches in Kentucky, Tennessee and Ohio: On Several Important Doctrines of Religion* (1814) and Alexander Campbell’s *The Christian System, in reference to the Union of Christians, and a restoration of Primitive Christianity as pled in the Current Reformation* (1835) both addressed theological topics—including the Trinity, Jesus Christ, atonement, the Holy Spirit, and faith—that were of particular interest to nineteenth-century North American Protestants. Neither is it that Disciples have never before published a multiauthor treatment of Disciples understandings of church teachings. In 1963 Bethany Press, an imprint of Christian Board of Publication, published the three-volume *The Panel of Scholars Reports*, with William B. Blakemore as general editor: volume 1, *The Reformation of Tradition*; volume 2, *The Reconstruction of Theology*; volume 3, *The Revival of the Churches*. The Panel, charged by the United Christian Missionary Society and the Board of Education of the Christian Churches (Disciples of Christ) to examine the doctrines and polity of the Disciples in light of contemporary scholarship, comprised fourteen educators affiliated with Disciples-related educational institutions and three ministers who were serving congregations during their membership on the panel. Rather than the subject—theology—or number of contributors, the global perspectives and the diversity of contributors sets this *Chalice Introduction to Disciples Theology* apart from any multiauthor Disciples introduction to theology that could have been published before now.

That Christian theology is coming of age in our increasingly globalized world is a fundamental premise of this introduction. The editor notes that as Christians from the Southern hemisphere confront the postcolonial realities associated with global capitalism, they provide important new challenges for contemporary North American theology. The Disciples theologies noted above assumed a universal theological context. In this twenty-first-century Disciples introduction to theology, the coverage of the five theological categories of The Task and Sources of Theology, God and Creation, The Church, Salvation, and Mission includes such topics as “Theology as Intercultural Conversation in an Age of Globalization,” “Theological Reasoning in a Pluralistic Context,” “Confessing Christ in Empire and Colony,” “The Church as Sacrament of Human Wholeness,” “Eschatology and Economy in Latin America and the Caribbean,” “Mission in Africa: An African Disciple Perspective,” “Mission in Pluralistic Contexts—A Caribbean Perspective,” “Ecumenism of Spirit and Mission: Disciples of Christ and Pentecostals in Venezuela,” “Global Chalice of Blessing: A

Christological Reading in the Face of globalized Imperialism," "The Future of Christian Mission in an Age of World Christianity." A twenty-first-century Disciples embrace of Christian theology in a globalized world is reflected in the diversity of the contributors to this volume. Barton Stone, Alexander Campbell, and all seventeen members of the Panel of Scholars were white North American males. In contrast, ten of the thirty-four contributors to this introduction are women, ten are persons of color, and the book includes voices from the Southern hemisphere. Were it not for the increasing diversity of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) and the increasing theological openness to that diversity among Disciples, this *Chalice Introduction to Disciples Theology* could not have been published.

One further note: this introduction to theology *would* not have been published without the vision and commitment of Chalice Press, a publishing imprint of the Christian Board of Publication, and the volume's editor, Peter Goodwin Heltzel. Contemporary Christians and future historians of Disciples at the dawn of the twenty-first century will be grateful for their vision and commitment.

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Introduction

Christian theology is coming of age in our increasingly globalized world. Christianity is exploding in the Southern Hemisphere at the same time that global capitalism continues to extend its global reach. As Southern Christians confront postcolonial realities, they provide important new challenges for contemporary North American theology.

The *Chalice Introduction to Disciples Theology* is an engaging, contemporary introduction to theology that reflects Christian identity from the perspective of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), ecumenical generosity, and global scope. The text provides a critical introduction to the nature, sources, contexts, and major doctrines of Christian theology for pastors, theological students, and Christian leaders across the ecumenical spectrum.

The authors of the present volume all come from a common Disciples theological tradition, but speak to the whole church in the context of our contemporary global situation. Each author is in conversation with the tradition: the Disciples tradition, and the ecumenical tradition. Because of our ecumenical vision of an open table, Disciples theologians are well positioned today to speak to the wider church and culture.

While united by a common Christian heritage, the theological reflection in the volume is nourished by a variety of cultural settings and theological perspectives. Each doctrine is considered in light of theology's globally diverse and locally specific contexts. Some authors write from specific cultural contexts outside of North America, such as Paraguay, Puerto Rico, the Caribbean, and sub-Saharan Africa. Those in the European-American tradition write as if they are contributing to a larger conversation with the faith and practice of the worldwide church. The authors represent a broad perspective of cultural and gender perspectives so that together we embody the broader discussion of global theology.

Our new global situation calls for a prophetic, intercultural theology. Multicultural models of ministry and theology often do not go far enough in addressing the legacies of colonialism and white supremacy that continue to afflict communities of color. An intercultural theology acknowledges cultural particularity and embraces the conflict that emerges through the historic and hermeneutic struggles that inform our distinct cultural realities. Intercultural conversation becomes a vital model for expanding the possibilities of theological conversation, including the recentering of voices that have been—and continue to be—marginalized. Intercultural conversation holds out the hope of us singing new songs together as we join in the gospel struggle for peace, love, and justice.

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This volume is divided into five sections. The first section discusses “The Task and Sources of Theology.” In chapter 1, Peter Goodwin Heltzel, James O. Duke, Verity Jones, and William J. Nottingham describe globalization that has become a central and overriding force in contemporary political, cultural, economic, and religious practice and discourse. They analyze key concepts from postcolonial studies that will be helpful in the construction of an intercultural theology. They go on to argue in chapter 2 that the Disciples are well positioned to make a vital contribution to twenty-first-century global theology. They discuss five central themes in the tradition that play an important role in Disciples theological table-talk: restoration, unity, interpretation, mission, and eschatology.

In chapter 3, Hee An Choi argues that while the Bible remains the primary source of theology for Disciples, it is vital for Disciples to interpret it from a postcolonial perspective. This will ensure that we are sensitive to difference, while acknowledging that we are “all of one piece.” In chapter 4, William Tabbernee argues that, despite the rhetoric of early Disciples leaders regarding “No creed but Christ” and “No book but the Bible,” Disciples have, in practice, taken seriously (and continue to take seriously) both the apostolic tradition and, as it developed, Disciples tradition. The author argues that because of their strong commitment to the visible unity of the Christian Church, Disciples also understand the imperative to take “ecumenical tradition” seriously in order to incorporate the theological insights of others, especially where there is now an ecumenical consensus or, at least, a convergence on particular issues. It is recognized, however, that, equally, Disciples insights on Christian faith and practice can also enrich the Christianity of those in other ecclesial traditions. For Disciples living in postcolonial times, “doing theology” is not a matter of reading the Bible and taking a few notes. “Theologizing” is hard, meticulous work: understanding, sifting, and incorporating relevant data from the “sources” of theology—which include three interrelated types of tradition: apostolic, denominational, and ecumenical.

In his recent book *Identity and Violence*, Harvard University economist Amartya Sen observes that “many of the conflicts and barbarities in the world are sustained through the illusion of a unique and choiceless identity,” derived from civilization or religion. A more adequate, less conflictive concept of identity, according to Sen, would recognize that identities are composites that draw together “plural affiliations” by making choices “about what relative importance to attach, in a particular context to the divergent loyalties”¹ that comprise human lives. Building from Sen’s proposal that identity is a composite of plural affiliations, Clark Gilpin argues in chapter 5 that the tasks assigned to *reason* in modern theology have primarily involved interpreting the relation between religion and other features of personal identity or other communities of affiliation. The chapter proposes that the Christian’s plural affiliations became a crucial theological issue

for the founders of the Disciples of Christ in early nineteenth-century America. From this historical case study, the chapter elaborates three forms of theological reasoning and assesses their implications for religious identity in the contemporary pluralistic context.

In chapter 6, Kristine A. Culp argues that a living faith and a living theology will always be learning from experience. In our day this entails rendering learning from the experiences of generations of Disciples; being mindful of whose experience has been excluded and whose has been assumed to be normative; being suspicious of how “personal experience” is packaged and used in globalized consumer cultures; and being open to new testimonies of justice and truth that emerge from the balconies, borderlands, and margins of the Disciples of Christ and of the world.

In chapter 7, Peter Heltzel and Don Browning observe a convergence among many contemporary movements of theology around some of core concerns of practical theology. They argue for a contextual theological method in three moments: the gospel moment, the historical moment, and the constructive moment. They argue for a redefinition of restoration as reconciliation. Furthermore, they argue that the church should embody practices of reconciliation as a constructive response to intercultural challenges of globalization.

Section II contains essays on “God in Creation.” Peter Heltzel argues in chapter 8 that Disciples should recover the doctrine of the Trinity in liturgical and social practice. Through analyzing Barton W. Stone’s rejection of the Trinity in light of contemporary Disciples practice, he notes a resilient unitarianism within the denomination. However, the ecumenical theme that drives the movement has driven the denomination through ecumenical dialogue and the restructure process to develop a more fully Trinitarian doctrine. He sees the Trinity’s emphasis on unity-in-diversity as supplying an important resource for intercultural theology today.

Clark Williamson’s argument on christology in chapter 9 locates Jesus Christ and Paul’s witness to him in the context of the Roman Empire and the varieties of Judaism at the time. It claims that this long-neglected but patently obvious context is crucial to understanding Jesus and Paul as well as the later Constantinian imperial subversion of their lives and witness. And it points out how the church was tempted by its establishment in the later empire to participate in this subversion as well. As an antidote to this subversion, both then and now in our American “imperium,” it seeks to reclaim the early witness to Jesus and Paul’s theology of the cross. In chapter 10, Rita Nakashima Brock writes a constructive christology. Building on her feminist critique of the atonement, she provides a postcolonial counter-genealogy to standard Western accounts of Christo-imperialism.

In chapter 11, Dyron Daugherty argues that we are witnessing a paradigm shift in the history of Christian theology. The Holy Spirit has made a radical comeback. Shortly after reaching its high point on Pentecost Sunday and

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in the lives of the earliest Christians, it soon became mired in controversy, particularly when adopted by Montanus, one of the better-known “heretics” of the second century. The Holy Spirit has since struggled to regain its rightful place as God. In recent decades, however, there has been a massive shift. Global Christianity is currently “under the influence” of the Holy Spirit in a profound way. Perhaps this great new fact of our time is not as evident in the West, but one thing is certain, the Southern churches have caught the winds of God—and they are on fire. This chapter provides an introduction to pneumatology by focusing on three contexts: biblical, historical, and the restoration tradition. Providing a backdrop for the chapter is the argument that pneumatology is making a radical comeback with the rise of non-Western Christianity. This will have major theological implications for the future of the Church.

In chapter 12, Victor Hunter argues for an approach to the doctrine of creation that explores the meaning of “eco-justice” and “creation-consciousness” in a world whose “life is under threat.” The theological meanings of creation are illuminated in relationship to other biblical concerns such as world origins, anthropology, redemption, ecology, ethics, and eschatology. The doctrine of creation is then set in the context of the five historic themes in the theology of the Disciples of Christ.

Section III is simply on “the Church.” In chapter 13, Sharon E. Watkins and Keith Watkins argue that the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) [CCDC] has long sought to live in this world as though the reality of God’s realm already applied. The desire to be a sign of a reality that only God can bring in its fullness can be described as sacramental. This sense of church joined with a passion for the unity of humankind suggests that for Disciples, church functions as a sacrament of human wholeness.

If the church is to be this kind of sacramental presence, it needs to move forward with clear purpose and strong resolve. The hard choice that churches are called upon to make is whether to live in ways that are consistent with and subservient to contemporary culture, or to live in ways that proclaim and exhibit a way of life that is more consistent with the realm of God that Jesus proclaimed. If the church is to be a sacrament of human wholeness, then the latter choice—difficult as it may be—is the one that must be taken.

In chapter 14, Thomas Best argues that in baptism Christ claims each of us for his own; and because we all belong to Christ, we all belong to one other, each of us members of Christ’s one body, the church. Baptism is a sign of the *unity* of the church, and a challenge to our divisions. From their beginning Disciples have valued baptism, practiced by immersion on confessing believers (“adult” baptism), as the individual’s response in faith to Christ’s gracious gift of salvation. Disciples’ experience in countries around the world, and within united and uniting churches, has led to a greater understanding of the intention behind “infant” baptism, and of some understandings of baptism other than our own.

Disciples have many opportunities for understanding of baptism to grow and develop. In worship we experience anew the saving events of our faith; we would do well as Disciples to practice remembering our baptism, as a way of renewing both the church and ourselves.

In Chapter 15, Belva Brown Jordan and Stephanie A. Paulsell reflect on spiritual and communal dimensions of the Lord's supper. In this chapter they reflect on our Disciples heritage, the stories of our faith, and our experiences of the Lord's supper to speak with gratitude about this central practice of Disciples life and with hope about how this meal—a meal that sets the standard for all our meals—teaches us to live with generosity and openness in a violent and troubled world.

In chapter 16, Kay Lynn Northcutt describes different operative theologies of Disciples preaching and applies them to the contemporary problem of cultural pluralism. With its righteous anger against church divisiveness and its distinctively modern insight that Protestant reform movements were themselves contributors to such divisions, the Disciples have not surprisingly birthed a wondrous variety of preaching, midwifed by a diverse chorus of preachers. This chapter explores the versatile voices, cultures, and operative theologies of preaching that emerged from the initial expressions of the Stone-Campbell movement up through its current global context as the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ).

In chapter 17, Mark Miller-McLemore argues that Disciples ministers understand themselves by what they do (their practices) rather than their pastoral office or doctrinal affirmations. Interviewing pastors from different racial-ethnic groups demonstrates that Disciples need to learn from other Disciples who do ministry differently.

Section IV turns to "Reconciliation." In chapter 18, Darryl Trimiew argues that Disciples need to embrace a doctrine of social sin. When it comes to controversial issues like race and gay-lesbian issues, Disciples have some very different understandings of what is sin. Trimiew argues that to be Disciples means to be willing to live with different understandings of sin. He sees this paradigm as providing a horizon of hope for communities that struggle with difference based on race and sexual orientation.

In chapter 19, Joe R. Jones argues that the heart of the Christian understanding of salvation is the incarnational narrative of the salvific work of Jesus Christ, which entails a trinitarian understanding of God and a sobering grasp of human sinfulness. Hence, the full range of salvation-talk is complex and multidimensional, and Jones proposes to map the deep interconnections in such talk. In the final analysis, Jones argues that the grace of God, as we know it in Jesus Christ, entitles and summons the church to trust in God's ultimate redemption of all creatures and the whole creation.

In chapter 20, Bosela Eale and William A. Wright take on the question, How and when do we make the transition from being lost to being saved? The authors engage in a dialogue between the experience of salvation within

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the Disciples of Christ Community in the Congo and the perspective on justification by faith within Euro-American theology, from the Reformation to Alexander Campbell and on to contemporary ecumenical breakthroughs. While the authors leave many questions open, they agree that the North American church should ask itself if it is taking seriously enough the difference salvation makes in our lives. Salvation, understood through justification by faith, cuts through the self-centering forces of our culture and opens us to a self-critical awareness of our global responsibilities.

In chapter 21, Karen Marie Yust argues that the early Disciples emphases on the Lord's supper and the importance of Bible study, coupled with reflection on our hymnody and the writings of Christian mystics, can help today's Disciples shape a contemporary understanding of holiness that fits the challenges of twenty-first-century life.

In chapter 22, Bonnie J. Miller-McLemore and Joseph D. Driskill argue that Disciples need to sanctify the ordinary through recovery of a spirituality of the everyday. In chapter 23, Angel Luis Rivera-Agosto presents eschatology in an earthy way that embraces the concrete struggles for economic justice in the Americas.

Section V focuses on "Mission." In chapter 24, Michael Kinnamon argues that prophetic witness is a vital part of the church's mission and witness. While the civil rights movement was a high watermark in the church's prophetic struggle, the struggle continues in an age of American empire. In chapter 25, Bosela Eale argues that African missiology is changing. There is no longer the thought of viewing mission as the work to be done by white men or women from Western nations. Africans are experiencing now the true sense of indigenous mission. In chapter 26 Michael Miller, a native of Jamaica, is critical of historic Christian mission ventures in the English-speaking Caribbean. He highlights the connection of these ventures with the colonizing project that included slavery and indentureship, and with the associated attempts to eclipse the religio-cultural foundations of non-European peoples. Miller takes the position that "the appropriate ethos for mission in the Caribbean is one in which religious and cultural diversity is engaged in critical, creative, and respectful ways for the deepening of insight, all-round refinement of thought, and strengthening of commitment to life-enhancing existence."

Miller identifies possible components for a broad conceptual framework from which can be derived tools of analysis and criteria for assessing relevant understandings of mission in the Caribbean context and elsewhere.

In chapter 27, Carmelo Alvarez argues that Disciples pneumatology should learn from the Pentecostals. He illustrates this through a case study of Disciples-Pentecostal dialogue in Venezuela. In chapter 28, Cristobal Mareco Lird explains the challenges of mission in Latin American, including the negative consequences of globalization. In chapter 29, Don Pittman provides a constructive Disciples theology of religions. Building on the Council

on Christian Unity's 2006 report, "Disciples of Christ and Interreligious Engagement," Pittman argues that interreligious dialogue and cooperation should be important aspects of ministry.

In chapter 30, Carlos F. Cardoza-Orlandi argues that Disciples theology must continue to be transformed by developments in world Christianity. The demographic transformation of the Christian religion, with its growth and vitality in the Third World and its decline and stagnation among many Euro-American Christian communities, generates new agents of Christian mission, questions about the nature and character of mission practices and theologies, and the challenge of an intercultural and interreligious mission matrix, the lifeblood of historic Christianity. There is a significant challenge to reinterpret the movement of the Christian religion accentuating the reality of world Christianity and discovering how these changes become a catalyst for the renewal of theology, mission, and the practices of ministry in local congregations in any context.

SECTION 1

The Task and Sources of Theology

Theology as Intercultural Conversation in an Age of Globalization

PETER GOODWIN HELTZEL, JAMES O. DUKE,
VERITY A. JONES, AND WILLIAM J. NOTTINGHAM

Christian theology in North America is at an impasse. At the moment when the U.S. nation-state as a superpower and the global hegemony of neo-liberal capitalism have coalesced, the church in the global South is experiencing dramatic growth; Europe is increasingly secularized; and North American historic Protestant churches are losing prominence. Not unrelated is the problem of global warming, as well as the growing gap between rich and poor that contributes to a crisis of hunger and violence worldwide. It is vital that contemporary Christian theology apply the gospel of Jesus Christ to these new global challenges. This chapter identifies critical elements of the current situation and suggests resources and directions for further theological reflection.

Globalization is one way of describing our new interconnected world. The term “globalization” can refer to a general system of social forces that presently function to bring our world together, including technology, telecommunications, urbanization, and democratic capitalism. Globalization has many dimensions, including economic, political, and cultural.

Economic globalization usually refers to a form of free-trade capitalism that has facilitated a transformation of national economies into regional and international trading blocks.¹ These new global economic networks have facilitated the flows of goods, services, and capital. Through digitalized money markets, investors are able to carry out massive global transfers of

financial capital. The Asian financial crisis in the 1990s demonstrated the global economic risk of speculative money trading growing in influence over traditional production-oriented labor. Economic globalization has changed the way that we have done business, but it has also transformed politics and culture.

The tentacles of globalization have grown so vast and pervasive that some commentators have referred to economic globalization as new forces of "empire." They argue that the current challenges of empire lay far beyond the imperialism of the great European nation-states of old Europe in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. In our post-cold war, post-9/11 context, many commentators point to the United States as a superpower nation-state internalizing and enacting the self-regulatory myth of empire that animated these modern European nation-states.² Other commentators like Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri view empire as a more diffuse social force that now spans the globe through a neo-liberal form of economic globalization and cultural hegemony.³

In the current "empire" debate, the United States is in the hot seat. If we understand empire as referring to the sovereignty of the most dominant nation-state in any given epoch, then the United States is an empire (*political globalization*). Today the United States does exert political influence and control over the sovereignty of other political societies. We see an explicit example of this in the War in Iraq, where the United States is using its military might to help establish a democratic nation-state. When the War in Iraq is placed in the context of the broader neo-conservative foreign policy strategy in the Middle East, the United States's ambitions for empire are apparent. While the War in Iraq is an example of a certain form of political globalization, it also demonstrates some of the limits of this project when they are placed in the context of cultural and religious difference.

The U.S. confrontation with cultural difference in Iraq demonstrates that the forces of globalization have dimensions beyond politics and economic production, including the phenomena of *cultural globalization*. Global cities, while crossroads for the flows of capital and political discourses, are also at the matrix of multiple cultures and multiple religions. Global multiculturalism provides an opportunity for a new, multicultural, world Christianity to continue to grow. The expansion of churches in Africa, Asia, Latin America, and the islands of the Caribbean and the South Pacific challenges churches in the United States to develop new models of ministry and to rethink global mission. Theologians of the South are asking a new set of questions concerning global fairness, poverty, world hunger, so-called Third World debt, and interreligious living for justice and peace.

I. Globalization and Christian Identity

The challenges posed by globalization are confronting the U.S. churches precisely at a moment of great cultural accommodation among both

evangelical churches and historic Protestant churches.⁴ Many Evangelical churches in the United States have been quick to internalize the imperial logic of empire through a commodification of the gospel that is often individualist, consumerist, and nationalistic in its orientation. Regardless of their cultural and political excesses, these churches in the United States have been growing quickly since the 1970s.

The historic Protestant churches entered the twentieth century with their own version of internalized imperial logic, poised to provide intellectual, cultural, and political leadership to the nation, which they did through the 1960s. However, once the country emerged from the civil rights movement and the Vietnam War, the historic Protestant churches began to experience a period of intense disestablishment. Through the powerful cultural forces of secularization and disillusionment, many young people stopped going to church.

Christian theology thinks creatively and contextually about the implications of the “evangel.” Evangel means gospel, the message of “God’s good news” of redemptive love for creation. Jesus of Nazareth proclaimed this message. Christians then proclaimed it thereafter as supremely expressed in Jesus’ person and work. Insistence on God’s rule by redemptive love was an affront to worldly rulers everywhere, Jew and Gentile establishments alike. The early church struggled for its life under the hegemony of imperial Rome and its client states. Christians, as well as countless others routinely termed dissenters, traitors, and no-accounts, were martyred in Rome’s Colosseum, and elsewhere throughout the Empire. Christian worship literally went underground into the catacombs. So vast, so pervasive, so inescapable and so terrible was the socio-political opposition to the message of God’s sovereign rule by redemptive love that the church in its early period identified itself as the community “other” than empire, and in opposition to it.

With Constantine’s Edict of Toleration in 313, which legalized Christian worship, and Theodosius’s proclamation that Christianity would be the official religion of the Roman Empire, the church itself came to internalize a new imperial logic. Such logic continued in the West through the period of colonization from the sixteenth century to early twentieth century. Thus, Christianity and the logic of empire have often inhabited the same historic, ideological, political, cultural, and geographic space.

In the late twentieth century, discussions of empire focused on the modern nation-state, exploring how European colonization often exhibited a symbiotic relationship between imperial expansion and Christian evangelization. Interestingly, the United States’s status as sole superpower nation-state has solidified at precisely the time when the Christian Right has gained an increasing amount of political capital. Images of a “Christian America” exporting “global freedom and democracy” dominate our culture. The Bush administration implemented a long-term international strategy and foreign policy similar to what Richard Falk called a “global domination

project.”⁵ In order to understand the extent and complexities of this project and its use of religion, our purview must move beyond analyzing power at the level of the nation-state to critiquing economic globalization trends and the increased militarization of the world. We must begin to analyze the relationship between economic globalization and the political, military, social, and cultural inequities in power globally.

Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, in their recent books *Empire* and *Multitude*, argue that the forces of empire lie even beyond the nation-state and superpowers, in the province of global neo-liberal capitalism.⁶ They see empire as a complex, trans-institutional system of global capital flows, opening up an even more complex account of globalization.

In addition to its transformation of political economy, globalization has also ushered in a new multiculturalism. This cultural dimension of globalization includes “the interconnectedness of all areas of our world—ecological, animal, human—and of all the people in the world.”⁷ In contrast to forms of globalization that provide an infrastructure for empire, this new framework of global intercultural interaction provides a vocabulary and analytic framework that could help us see the positive features of our globalized world.

Global cities have become new crossroads of global migration and diverse cultural interactions. They are symbols of this new multiculturalism. Poor people flock to the cities as part of a growing transnational labor pool. Saskia Sassen writes, “Much of the multiculturalism in large cities is as much a part of globalization as is international finance.”⁸ Multiculturalism is a sign of hope for a world that is fractured and searching for peace. Respecting and extending hospitality to the cultural “other” becomes a new challenge for the social witness of Christian churches.

While many declining churches in the United States are trying to maintain prophetic witness and moral integrity in an age of empire, the churches in Africa, Asia, Latin America, and the Islands of the Caribbean and Pacific are exploding with life. Indigenous Christian communities dating from the time of the apostles and churches established by modern Western missionaries experience globalization very differently from churches in the North. The center of gravity of Christianity has shifted to the global South. Informed by mission studies, ecumenical theology, and church history, a new academic field, “world Christianity,” appeared in the late twentieth century to study these new expressions of Christianity, particularly the ones that have been marginalized in the Eurocentric accounting of Christian history and theology.⁹ Urban multiculturalism and world Christianity demonstrate not just that Christianity is a global, multicultural reality, but that it always has been and always will be.

Many expressions of non-Western Christianity stand in bold defiance to the fundamental assumptions and structures of Western Christianity, including its participation in the excesses of the United States, such as

rampant consumerism and high rates of pollution. The rise of global Christianity intensifies the theological and ethical problems the U.S. church is facing: How is the church to bear prophetic witness today in the United States when we, as the church, are often in captivity to racism, materialism, and militarism? Will it ever be possible for the church in the United States to embody the radical, communitarian vision of Christianity of the early church that “held all things in common,” when the forces of empire are so great? Do our models of church re-inscribe the logic of empire, or do they prophetically resist the forces of empire? How do our churches relate to “the other,” be they a racial/ethnic other or a religious other? Will our churches be capable of a global consciousness for justice and peace in a suffering world?

As churches in the United States begin to confront honestly the numerous theological and ethical issues raised by these new global realities, new ways of doing theology open up. The recent recognition in religious studies of the emergence of Christianity as a global phenomenon, the status of the United States as the sole superpower in the world, the emergence of capitalism as the new global economic order, and the resistance of theologians in the South to Northern and Western models of faith create the conditions for the construction of a new, multicultural, North American Christian theology.

II. Theology’s Postcolonial Context

In order for twenty-first-century theology to respond to its multicultural contexts, it must begin to answer questions raised by postcolonial studies. Postcolonialism is a political form of postmodernism. Postcolonial studies has an unflinching commitment to lifting up the voices of those who have been silenced through patterns and practices of colonialization.

Postcolonial studies has two primary strategies: deconstructing Western hegemony and reconstructing postcolonial identity. Because the focus of postcolonial studies is on culture, it is also referred to as “transnational cultural studies.” As we reflect on Christianity’s multicultural fabric, postcolonial studies provide important resources for addressing the collusions and contrasts between the empire and the evangel.

During the period of colonization, European nation-states “discovered” and “colonized” vast regions of land in Asia, Africa, and the Americas. The primary logic of national expansion was the imperial logic of empire. With roots in the civil theology of the Roman Empire, the logic of *imperium* compelled the empire toward expansion through conquest. This same colonial logic continued in the rise of the nation-states of Europe and in the current unilateral interventionism of the United States.

The postcolonial circumstance in the United States may be better described as *internal colonialism*.¹⁰ The United States came into being through a violent and revolutionary break with the British Empire. However, as the young nation forged across the Western frontier—with religious groups like the Stone-Campbell followers moving with it—the young nation often implemented new forms of imperial logic.

American imperialism differed from the imperial projects of the British, French, and Dutch empires in Oceania, Africa, and Asia, whose colonial enterprises set the conditions for an eventual radical and rapid decolonization process through national independence movements. When the United States expanded across the frontier it did not form new colonized communities from its conquered territories; the European settlers simply moved in. Consequently, the conquered people experienced internal colonizing rather than overt colonizing. For example, Native Americans and Latino/as were treated as colonized people in their own land, while African American slaves were colonized through sustained violence and control.

As a result, colonization in the United States remained intentionally ambiguous. That Puerto Rico became a U.S. colony in 1898 even though other areas did not illustrates the ambiguous complexity of the American Empire's modes of colonization. While it became a commonwealth in 1948, Puerto Rico still exists in an "in-between" space between being a colony and being fully incorporated into the United States. Thus, internal oppression becomes a way of speaking about the neocolonial hegemonic structures that continue to legitimate racial and economic oppression in the dominating class in the United States and its "colonies" and "colonized people."

In addition to deconstructing Western hegemony, postcolonial studies provides three linguistic and symbolic resources for the construction of non-Western identity: *différance*, subaltern, and hybridity. Discussions in postcolonial studies often presuppose Jacques Derrida's French post-structural notion of *différance*.¹¹ *Différance* refers to the irreducible "otherness" that is constitutive of human identity. This thick sense of difference provides a counter-logic to the deceptively smooth sameness of empire by affirming otherness and particularity in the context of a common messianic longing among all humans and the earth.

Gayatri Spivak's concept, "subaltern," builds on Derrida's concept of *différance* in a manner that helps bring voice to the postcolonial identities of colonized peoples. "Subaltern" is based on two words: "sub," meaning below, refers to the people who are on the underside of colonization; "altern" refers to the unique "difference" in their subjectivity (their alterity). Subaltern describes the voices of those on the margins in an age of empire whose language and expression is defined by the empire.¹² Spivak's question is, in an age of empire is it even possible for subaltern voices to really speak?¹³ Spivak warns that the process of subaltern voicing and the process of Westerners joining with subaltern voices is that these enterprises can veil new forms of neocolonial oppression.

One version of this form of neocolonization is the essentializing that goes on in the Western imagination relative to the rest of the world. For example, as Edward Said has pointed out in his classic *Orientalism*, "orientals" function as an imaginary "other" constructed by the West to implement discursive hegemony in the colonial enterprise in Asia.¹⁴ The "Chinatowns" in U.S. cities become an example of the Western projection of "China" that

lies hidden behind the hybrid, diasporic communities embodied in the Chinatowns of U.S. urban centers.¹⁵ In these two examples, what is “Asian” is essentialized or reduced to an abstract essence in the terms “oriental” and “Chinatown.”¹⁶ When we essentialize a person or a racial/ethnic community, we imaginatively interpret people into our own image of who they are, instead of accepting them as they actually are. While Spivak warns people against being assimilated into dominant culture through acceptance of essentialized global ethnic identities, she also is against rejecting everything Western and adopting a purely “native” non-Western identity.

Solidarity becomes a mode of intimacy for subaltern voices and those outside. This solidarity can extend to all people who can acknowledge their difference and common human longings. Spivak argues that a genuine acknowledgment of *différance* creates the conditions for intimacy: “Solidarity comes from exchange of information and a bonding through acknowledgement of difference.”¹⁷ True solidarity provides a way for subaltern identity not to degenerate into individualism, particularism, or relativism. It provides the basis for true communication and a common human future. Spivak reminds us that multicultural solidarity can come about by moving beyond generalized notions of national identity to a posture of listening in which difference is accepted and respected.¹⁸

Spivak, like other postcolonial theorists, appeals to the concept of “hybridity” to frame this dialectic between solidarity and the subaltern. Hybridity refers to a multicultural identity that is not dominated by the hegemony of one race and ethnicity. The postcolonial language of hybridity provides another way of speaking about the difference and sameness that lies within the construction of all human identities. While modernity presented both interior and exterior space as a centered, unified whole, postcolonial spaces are “in-between” spaces on the borderlands. As Christian theology moves ahead in the twenty-first century, it will have to explore these “in-between” spaces on the borderlands of our world.

III. Theology as Intercultural Conversation

Globalization demonstrates that all of the different contexts of theology are interconnected. Postcolonial studies have lifted up cultural difference as an intellectual and ethical problem in light of the history of colonialism. Within modern theology, theologies of liberation have taken cultural context to be an important source of theology. In the 1950s and 1960s, many of these feminist and liberationist theologians conceived of themselves as functioning in unique and separate domains. However, postcolonial notions of culture challenge these contextual theologies to move beyond an identity-politics framework for theology that seeks to reflect theologically from one particular context. In contrast, we must now do theology through the interactions that occur at the borders of different contexts.

To respond theologically to the problem of globalization, we argue that theology should be conceived as an intercultural conversation. In the context of feminist theology, Kwok Pui-lan has argued that theology is an intercultural discourse.¹⁹ Feminist theology began through Christian women theologizing on the basis of their experience of God as women. Postcolonial feminist theology has demonstrated that gender has different significations in different cultures. Thus, cultural context has become increasingly important in feminist theological method.

Early modern theorists of culture often thought about these groupings of ethnic people in categories of coherence and purity. However, postcolonial constructions of cultures as fluid and permeable have problematized these notions. The legacy of colonization has exposed that the cultural context of the colonized subject looks very different from the cultural context of the colonizing subject. The gap between these two experiences is caused largely by white supremacy. White supremacy has roots in the European Enlightenment and was exported through the whole process of colonization. David Theo Goldberg argued that general categories such as “exotic,” “oriental,” and “Jew” (as racial and not merely religious other)²⁰ originated during the Enlightenment. These European Enlightenment thinkers often thought of these racialized cultures as discrete (and pure) wholes. While many have noted the streams of racial “purity” in the signification of “whiteness,” Renato Rosaldo argues that the white colonizers who were subject to “imperialist nostalgia” also conceived of the precolonial “native” cultures as pure.²¹ Both of these two-way contrasts reinforced the power of the white colonizer. The colonizers, who were largely “whites” from Europe, took over territories that became their “colonies,” and established institutions that benefited white power and privilege. Thus, in some sense the deconstruction of colonial institutions and mindsets is a dismantling of racist social structures and ideologies.

As the colonized subjects struggled for cultural autonomy through the process of decolonization, they were forced to account for the way in which local cultures shaped personal and collective identity, including one’s religious identity. To become oneself was to move beyond the racialized and colonized constructions of selfhood. Postcolonial studies provide theologians with important resources to dismantle the ideas of white supremacy and empower communities of color to sing a new song in a foreign land. As Rita Nakashima Brock argues, the concept of “interstitial integrity” is a way to understand how people navigate their identity and allow them to exist in different and sometime conflicting cultures.²²

Because of the struggle for postcolonial identity in light of the tortured history of colonization, contemporary theology needs to move from a multicultural framing to an intercultural framing. Kwok Pui-lan argues that feminist theology is:

...not only multicultural, rooted in multiple communities and cultural contexts, but is also intercultural because these different cultures are not isolated but intertwined with one another as a result of colonialism, slavery, and cultural hegemony of the West. By intercultural, I mean the interaction and juxtaposition, as well as tension and resistance when two or more cultures are brought together sometimes organically and sometimes through violent means in the modern period. This intercultural approach allows us to theorize identity, experience, agency, and justice through a cross-cultural lens.²³

The intercultural approach to theology demands that we listen to and are shaped by different cultural others who have often been excluded.

We must also pay attention to the influence that cultures have on one another. Conversation provides the space of mutual listening and learning. Theology as intercultural conversation is a dialectical phenomenon. Robert J. Schreiter writes, "Dialectic is to be understood as a continuing attention to first one factor, and then another, leading to an ever-expanding awareness of the role and interaction of each of these factors."²⁴ Through conversation we gain recognition of the ways in which different cultures have shaped and continue to shape our theological thinking and practices. Practicing theology as an intercultural conversation demands new modes of historiography and new forms of constructive theology.²⁵

Intercultural theology transforms church history. As we narrate Christian history, we must start with the voices that have been historically marginalized. Listening to and learning from each other in the context of trusting community is vital for our new horizon of theologizing. Listening to each person and community in their concrete cultural particularity is a form of loving the neighbor. While these interventions initially fragment traditional historical renderings, they also open up the space for new stories and new theologies to emerge. This historical transformation can be understood as moving from church history to world Christianity. Instead of thinking about Christian history in the Western categories of the Euro-American church, an intercultural theological approach considers Christianity from the vastly different cultural traditions that form it. In the context of North American Disciples theology, this will mean privileging African American, Asian American and Latino/a narratives.

Intercultural theology transforms our understanding of race. Intercultural theology provides new ways of thinking about race and the struggle for justice. Much of early Disciples progressive thinking on racial justice is indebted to embracing the African American freedom struggle. African American Disciples have struggled throughout Disciples history to help white Disciples understand this historic oppression. Through the Black Manifesto and the Anti-Racism/Pro-Reconciliation initiative, the African

American and white churches have grown closer, as well as deepened their interactions with Asian American and Latino/a Disciples. Intercultural theology as a postcolonial movement calls us to move beyond the construct of the liberation of people of one particular community. Robust intercultural transformation comes at the point of deepest interaction of intercultural conversation and solidarity. As all communities of color continue to grow together at the points of their deepest interactions, new liberating theologies will emerge. With the greatest insights from all cultural traditions, Disciples can contribute to the formation of ministries that are care-giving and justice-making in the face of the impact of globalization on church and community. It is only when all cultural communities have an equal place at our open table that we will be able to collectively actualize our subversive agency for the kingdom cause of love and justice in the world.

Finally, intercultural theology is also prophetic. By prophetic we refer to the tradition of ethical reflection embodied in the Hebrew prophets and embodied in the Messianic ministry of Jesus Christ (Lk. 4:16–18). Prophets proclaim a word of God's grace and judgment. In our contemporary context, this prophetic spirit includes denouncing evil and oppression while building subversive communities of peace, justice, and love that embody God's eschatological reign.²⁶ Thinking about theology as an intercultural conversation puts theology in conversation with new partners. The postcolonial and liberationist framing of this theology places the common struggle for justice in our globalized age at the fore. Therefore, a new coalitional social ethic often emerges through this conversation.

Conclusion

An increasing number of North American theologians are looking to postcolonial studies to provide a framework for constructive theology.²⁷ Postcolonial theology is able to build on models of contextual and local theology that emerged with identity theologies in the 1960s. Through a deeper consideration of the social location of particular theologies, including ethnic identity and socio-economic contexts, theology in North America has become more concrete in its expressions as well as more representative of the ethnic diversity of national and international Christianity.²⁸

As we consider North American theology's different contexts, we notice several distinctions. First, the context of colonialism in the United States is different than that of Europe. Second, within North America, each ethnic group has a set of distinct contexts. Third, there is a difference between "white" European-Americans and people of color due to unjust power relations and community cultures. It is vital that historic Protestant churches navigate these complex postcolonial contexts and construct a new postcolonial theology that exhibits honest dialogue and solidarity between the colonizers and the colonized in matters of theology, ethnicity, and gender.