Creating a contextual approach to evangelizing Theravada Buddhists

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1.1 Title and key words:

1.1.1 Title “Creating a contextual approach to evangelizing Theravada Buddhists.”

1.1.2 Key words: Buddhism, worldview, evangelism, contextual, gospel, Theravada Buddhism, apologetics, contextual approach

1.2 Abstract: For Christian apologists and evangelists to understand why the evangelism of Theravada Buddhists has been for the most part unsuccessful, it is necessary to understand the Theravada worldview from a Christian perspective. To create a contextual approach to evangelising Theravada Buddhists it must be achieved in a way that is relevant to culture, understandable within contexts and fitting the local culture to which it is presented.

1.3 Background & problem statement

1.3.1 Background

Of the major religions of people, The Buddhist Block that lies within the 10-40 window is one of the least successfully evangelised groupings of people in the World. “Yet over 200 years of intense mission effort has not produced the results that would make Christianity a significant cultural force in any of these Southeast Asian countries. By and large Christianity remains a foreign religion, interlopers on turf well staked out by Buddhist dharmadhatus” (Muck, Netland & McDermot, 2014:93). Upon simple examination, the Buddhist worldview makes conversion and understanding the gospel exceptionally difficult. After understanding the unique Buddhist worldview and the specific cultural expression of Theravada Buddhism, this paper will examine and propose a strategy that could be more successful in fulfilling the great commission (Matt 28:18-20) of winning Theravada Buddhists for Christ. Theravada
Buddhism has been specifically selected as the subject of this paper, in order to refine the effectiveness and specificity of the understanding of the Buddhist worldview.

1.3.2 Problem statement

After hundreds of years of evangelism and church planting within Theravada Buddhist countries, there seems to be only minimal impact in the over-all culture. Although there are churches in Theravada Buddhist environments, and much work has been done, the churches are a small percentage of the population and could be much more effective in their outreach.

Research Questions:

1. What are the main aspects of the Theravada Buddhist worldview and in what way does it compare to the Christian worldview?
2. What is contextualization, and is it biblical?
3. How can contextualization help evangelism within Buddhist majority nations?
4. Will contextualization improve evangelism and church planting methods within Theravada Buddhist nations?

1.4 Preliminary literature study:

There have been some very good comparative religious study works done such as “Buddhism: A Christian exploration and appraisal” by Yandell and Netland: (IVP Publishers, 2009). Another excellent comparison book is “The Buddha and the Christ, Reciprocal views” by Ernest Valea: (BookSurge Publishing, 2008). However, the emphasis of both of these magnificent books is comparison not evangelism, church planting or seeing salvation within the specific context of Theravada Buddhism. There are, however, some excellent works put out by The William Carey Library: “Sharing Jesus Effectively in the Buddhist World” (Lim, D., Spaulding, S. and De Neui, P. 2005) and “Sharing Jesus Holistically with the Buddhist World” (Lim, D. and Spaulding, S. 2005). These have been compiled by authors David Lim,
Steve Spaulding and Paul De Neui, and are excellent in looking at the monumental task of effective evangelism of Buddhists. These SEANET books are a compilation of various missionaries, church planters and pastors that have extensive field experience within the Buddhist Block. In the past two years, several other valuable resources have become available, *One Gospel for All Nations* by Jackson Wu (2016) and *Ministering in Honor-shame Cultures* by Jayson Georges and Mark Baker (2016). Although there are now some good general resources on contextualization, this serves as a needed addition to the area of contextualizing the gospel to Theravada Buddhists.

1.5 Aim and objectives:

1.5.1 Aim

Comparing and contrasting Evangelical Christianity and Theravada Buddhism with a practical emphasis on creating a contextual approach to evangelism and church planting that will be effective in Buddhist majority nations.

1.5.2 Objectives

1. Compare and contrast the Theravada Buddhist worldview to the Christian worldview in such a way as to begin to understand the vast differences.

2. Examine method and contextualization, and establish that it is biblical and historical.

3. Look at how proper contextualization will help evangelism within Buddhist majority nations.

4. Using the framework of non-syncretic contextualization to improve on evangelism and church planting methods.

1.6 Central theoretical argument

The lack of progress of Christianity in majority Theravada Buddhist countries underlines the importance of understanding the tenets and practices of Theravada Buddhism, especially those that are opposite to Christian doctrine. This paper will look at specific methods
of evangelism and church planting that will be effective within the Theravada portion of the Buddhist majority nations. It is necessary to understand the central tenets of Theravada Buddhism, and work towards a framework of presenting a thoroughly and truthfully contextualized gospel in the Buddhist majority nations to reverse the missional inadequacies. “I became aware that Christian mission has little success (qualitatively as well as quantitatively) in developing indigenous communities in countries such as Thailand, Laos, Vietnam, and Japan” (De Neui & Lim, 2006:25). In speaking to the need of contextualization Wu (2016:4) says this: “Contextualization is not merely an important additive to mission theory; it is inevitable. In the same way that architectural plans determine the design for a building, so also contextualization is an essential element of mission strategy” (emphasis mine) (Wu, 2016:4).

The central theoretical argument is therefore to create a contextual approach to evangelizing Theravada Buddhists that will speak to the people in that culture, and results in successfully planting churches within those cultures.

1.7 Research design

This is a literature study that outlines the key aspects of Theravada Buddhism and compares and contrasts it with Evangelical Christianity, after which it proceeds to look at the available, effective strategies and successes in winning Buddhists to Christ. For this purpose, resources and publications of those methods that are used with more or less success in countries such as Thailand, Sri Lanka and other predominantly Theravada countries, will be examined.

1.8 Concept clarification and definition

There are numerous differences and similarities between the two main streams of Buddhism, namely Theravada and Mahayana. In order to boost the effectiveness of evangelism
and understanding, only Theravada Buddhism is the focus of this paper. To be aware of the basic differences between Mahayana and Theravada is essential in further understanding and making evangelistic endeavours more effective. Lim and Spaulding (2005:32) agree when saying: “In Asian-Buddhist contexts, how a person encounters Theravada Buddhists must be highly differentiated from the way that the same individual interacts with Mahayana Buddhists.”

1.8.1 In defining some key concepts:

Theravada Buddhism: The strict adherence to the doctrine of the Buddhist elders and use of the Pali canon. Most dominantly found in the countries of Thailand, Cambodia, Laos, Burma, Sri Lanka. The Princeton dictionary of Buddhism (2014:904) defines Theravada as “In Pali, ‘Way of the Elders’ or ‘School of the Elders’; a designation traditionally used for monastic and textual lineages, and expanded in the modern period to refer to the dominant form of Buddhism of Sri Lanka and Southeast Asia, which is associated with the study of the Pali Buddhist canon.”

Evangelical Christianity: Christian belief system that holds to an authoritative biblical gospel, to the importance of evangelism, and to the accuracy of God’s word. Belief that salvation comes only through faith in the redeeming work of Jesus Christ and a vital relationship with Him.

Worldview: The broad and intrinsic set of beliefs that a person or group of people live according to on a consistent basis.

Evangelism: The use of various spiritual and practical means to inform people about a saving knowledge of Jesus Christ, and their need for Him, with the intent on leading them into that very relationship.
**Contextualization**: Jackson Wu’s (2016:5) definition of contextualization works sufficiently for the purposes of this paper: “Contextualization is the process whereby Christians adapt the forms, content and praxis of the Christian faith so as to communicate it to the minds and hearts of other people with other cultural backgrounds.”

**Contextual approach**: An active, indigenous approach that looks at taking essential biblical truths and framing them in a biblically accurate, authentically truthful way whilst remaining relevant to a specific sub-set of culture.

**Gospel**: The soteriological message from the Holy Scriptures of the life, death, resurrection of Jesus Christ, presented to unsaved people and people groups worldwide. Wu (2015:40) frames the concept of the gospel as follows: “The Bible consistently uses three particular themes to frame the gospel. These framework themes are creation, covenant, and kingdom.”

**Apologetics**: The field of study that looks at the difficulties and objections to faith, and works towards logical, articulate, reasonable and consistent answers to the important questions of life and faith, with the direct intent of opening a way for the gospel to get to the hearts of people that need it.

1.9 **Ethical considerations**

It is vitally important that evangelism must in no way demean the God-given cultural expressions that are evident within Buddhist host cultures. Any attempt to “Westernize” the people (impose a set of beliefs that are culturally from the West) and in so doing demean the culture of the peoples that are Theravada Buddhists would be unbiblical and ultimately counter-productive. It is essential to the efficacious work of contextualization that any and all forms of
syncretism be avoided. “I hope to have shown that Buddhist-Christian syncretism is not credible” (Valea, 2008:188). This paper will deliberately hold the careful dynamic tension of contextualization while simultaneously and conscientiously avoiding the syncretic system of incorporating any ungodly beliefs and worldviews. “Syncretism emerges whenever the biblical message is made to harmonize so closely with a given culture (or subculture) that the biblical truth is compromised” (Wu. 2016:10).

According to the Risk Levels for Humanities, used by universities in South Africa, the present research should be classified at the minimal, low or negligible risk level. Because no participants will be involved in the process of the research, no harm can be anticipated as a result of this research. The research will gather data by literature review already available in the public domain.

1.10 Differentiation between Theravada and Mahayana Buddhism

The specificity of this paper limits its scope to Theravada Buddhism, and in defining Theravada Buddhism, it is useful to understand some of the basic differences between Theravada Buddhism and the much larger Mahayana Buddhism. Mahayana Buddhism is defined in The Princeton Dictionary of Buddhism (2014:513) as:

In Sanskrit, ‘Great Vehicle’; a term, originally of self-appellation, which is used historically to refer to a movement that began some four centuries after the Buddha’s death, marked by the composition of texts that purported to be his words (BUDDHAVACANA). Although ranging widely in content, these texts generally set forth the bodhisattva path to Buddhahood as the ideal to which all should aspire and described bodhisattvas and buddhas as objects of devotion.

One area of agreement between the two largest streams of Buddhism comes in their emphasis on the teaching of Three Jewels: “In Buddhism, we take refuge in Three Jewels – Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha. They are the Buddhist trinity: I take refuge in the Buddha, the one who shows me the way in this life. I take refuge in the Dharma, the way of understanding
and love. I take refuge in the Sangha, the community that lives in harmony and awareness” (Hanh, 1995:118). The majority of Buddhists hold these three essential facets of their religious experience as significant and core to their belief systems. As Hanh illuminated, these three tenets are the Buddha, the Buddhist teaching and the Buddhist body of adherents. These specific factors and how they relate to a thoroughly Buddhist worldview is essential in understanding the undertaking and unique difficulty when evangelizing any people group that lives according to Buddhist presuppositions.

In defining Theravada Buddhism, Gombrich (1988:3) makes a concise statement that is useful in delineating the difference between the Theravada stream of Buddhism and all other subsequent branches of Buddhism: “The term means ‘Doctrine of the Elders’; the elders in question are the senior monks, who preserve tradition. This title thus claims conservatism. An adherent of Theravada is called a Theravadin.” Gombrich goes on to make a further qualification in the strictness of the Theravada stream of Buddhism: “Hallmarks of Theravada Buddhism are the use of Pali as its main sacred language and dependence on the Pali version of the Buddhist Canon as its sacred scripture” (Gombrich, 1988:3). One factor that separates the Theravada teaching and praxis is their view of a historical Buddha. “The Theravada school of Buddhism emphasizes the actual teaching of the historical Buddha, the Buddha who lived and died” (Hanh, 1995:50). This belief mirrors the Evangelical position of an actual, verifiable, historical Jesus who lived in ancient Israel in the first century.

Theravada Buddhism does not teach or endorse the doctrine of “Bodhisattvas,” and does not propagate the multiple Buddha assertions that are found in the Mahayana Buddhism teachings. This is significant within the field of evangelism and worldview comparison, because Theravada Buddhists will not acknowledge Bodhisattvas.
Another striking difference between Theravada and Mahayana is the emphasis on who can attain nirvana. Theravada Buddhism emphasizes the necessity of becoming an *arahat* (monk or a nun) in order to attain nirvana within this life time. “Theravada Buddhism is a religion of and for monks. The monks, *bikhus*, are the only ones who can attain nirvana; they are the focal point of religious practice. The laity’s primary job is to support the monks” (Corduan, 1998:225). This essential difference is very significant, in how one approaches a Buddhist adherent. This emphasis on monks and nuns is a very significant difference to that of Mahayana Buddhism, which holds that anyone can reach nirvana in this life if they walk the eightfold path. Consequently, it means that the laity in Theravada Buddhism will be very different than in Mahayana contexts.

2 Buddhist worldview compared to a Christian worldview

“Buddhism is a large and complex subject, and we should be wary of generalizations made on the basis of familiarity with any single part” (Keown, 2000:2). The caution of this secular author is a very pertinent one. Buddhism is strikingly complex and has many differing
variations and expressions. It is critical not to over-generalize when assessing and comparing Theravada Buddhism to Evangelical Christianity.

The Buddhist religion started as a reformation from the Hindu religion, and became a very effective, refined form of Hinduism. “Many different sects of Hinduism arose, the most successful being that of Buddhism, which denies the authority of the Vedas” (McDowell, 1990:288).

There are many fundamental differences in the Buddhist worldview when compared to the Christian worldview. Understanding these differences is essential in being able to address a proper contextualization of the gospel within Theravada contexts. These differences between worldviews include but are not limited to: karma, rebirth, godlessness (but not atheism), Four noble truths, meditation, desire and suffering, syncretism, enlightenment and nirvana, absence of individual identity, works soteriology, self-reliance, sinless perfectionism and lastly Upaya (skilful means). Each of these strategic differences ought to be considered prior to effectively evangelising Buddhists. This is by no means a comprehensive list of the differences; it merely highlights some of the major points of departure where Buddhism and Christianity present and believe very different doctrines.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Buddhist worldview</th>
<th>Christian worldview</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Karma</td>
<td>Sin</td>
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<tr>
<td>Rebirth</td>
<td>One life to repent</td>
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<td>Godlessness (but not atheism)</td>
<td>One perfect author and creator of life</td>
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<tr>
<td>Four noble truths</td>
<td>Biblical truth &amp; the Four Spiritual Laws</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meditation</td>
<td>Prayer</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

1 “Everyone who contextualizes the Gospel must first know what the Bible says, yet one can quickly forget that we all interpret the Bible through our cultural lens. Our worldview has great influence on our interpretation” (Wu, 2016:6).
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Desire and suffering,</th>
<th>Sin nature</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Syncretism (<em>amongst the laity</em>),</td>
<td>Exclusivism</td>
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<tr>
<td>Enlightenment and nirvana,</td>
<td>Heaven</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Absence of individual identity,</td>
<td>Endorsement of individual salvation and worth</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Works soteriology</td>
<td>Faith based salvation</td>
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<tr>
<td>Self-reliance</td>
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<td>Sinless perfectionism</td>
<td>Progressive sanctification and ultimate perfection</td>
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<tr>
<td><em>Upaya</em> and skilful means</td>
<td>One road to heaven, Jesus</td>
</tr>
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### 2.1 Karma vs sin

“According to the Buddhist teaching the law of karma is the ultimate regulating principle governing the outcome of human existence” (De Neui and Lim, 2006:210). Karma can be defined as the impersonal force that rewards those that do good and penalizes those that do evil; it is the primary force that causes humankind to either ascend or descend the ladder of existence with the end goal of eventual nirvana after all karmic debt is paid.

#### 2.1.1 Theravada concept of karma

The system in which a participant in Theravada Buddhism can either climb or fall in the system of rebirth is by karma. The Buddhist view of how one attains ‘*good karma*’ is through the good deeds of the eightfold path, as taught by the Buddha. Theravada Buddhism makes it very clear that the Buddha was a man – even though he was a great teacher and achieved enlightenment while still on earth: “Buddhists regard the Buddha as a teacher and a brother, not as a god” (Hanh, 1995:40).

The Eight-fold path has three distinct categories: wisdom, morality and meditation. *In the Buddha’s own words* (Bodhi, 2005:393) recounts the eightfold path from SN 55:5; V410-
11: “This Noble Eightfold Path, venerable sir, is the stream; that is, right view, right intention, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, right concentration.”

Modern Buddhists such as John Allen (2016) have clarified the path this way2:

1. **Samma-Ditthi — Complete or Perfect Vision.** Also translated as right view or understanding. Vision of the nature of reality and the path of transformation.

2. **Samma-Sankappa — Perfected Emotion or Aspiration.** Also translated as right thought or attitude. Liberating emotional intelligence in your life and acting from love and compassion. An informed heart and feeling mind that are free to practice letting go.

3. **Samma-Vaca — Perfected or whole Speech.** Also called right speech. Clear, truthful, uplifting and non-harmful communication.

4. **Samma-Kammanta — Integral Action.** Also called right action. An ethical foundation for life based on the principle of non-exploitation of oneself and others. The five precepts.

5. **Samma-Ajiva — Proper Livelihood.** Also called right livelihood. This is a livelihood based on correct action the ethical principal of non-exploitation. The basis of an ideal society.

6. **Samma-Vayama — Complete or Full Effort, Energy or Vitality.** Also called right effort or diligence. Consciously directing our life energy to the transformative path of creative and healing action that fosters wholeness. Conscious evolution.

7. **Samma-Sati — Complete or Thorough Awareness.** Also called "right mindfulness." Developing awareness, "if you hold yourself dear watch yourself well." Levels of Awareness and mindfulness - of things, oneself, feelings, thought, people and Reality.

8. **Samma-Samadhi — Full, Integral or Holistic Samadhi.** This is often translated as concentration, meditation, absorption or one-pointedness of mind. None of these translations is adequate. Samadhi literally means to be fixed, absorbed in or established at one point; thus the first level of meaning is concentration when the mind is fixed on a single object. The second level of meaning goes further and represents the establishment, not just of the mind, but also of the whole being in various levels or modes of consciousness and awareness. This is Samadhi in the sense of enlightenment or Buddhahood.

Theravada Buddhist teaching promulgates that there are innumerable lifetimes to achieve nirvana. This is in stark contrast to the biblical doctrine in 2 Corinthians 5:10, “For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each of us may receive what is due

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2 This Excerpt is from John Allan on Buddhanet.net, and accurately reflects how Buddhism teaches the Eightfold path. It is unaltered and quoted directly from Buddhanet.net.
us for the things done while in the body, whether good or bad.” This concise and direct statement of the Christian doctrine of Judgment is the exact opposite of the Buddhist teachings that affirms many lifetimes of karma to eventually achieve nirvana. This doctrine will be carefully assessed in section 2.2, but it bears weight as to how one sees the concept of karma and what karma achieves.

Another significant way in which the Buddhist doctrine of karma expresses itself is by placing a high value on life and how one treats all life forms: “Toward all living beings, on earth and in the worlds beyond, the weak and the strong, the high and the low, the good and the bad, the near and the far, let him be well disposed” (Baynes, 1906:86). This positive treatment of all life forms is one opportunity in which a Buddhist can “make merit” or produce good karma. This is one of the reasons why many Theravada Buddhists do not eat meat. There is however a slight level of agreement at this juncture between Christian and Buddhist doctrine; the Christian worldview advocates that as stewards of the earth, Christians are to take care of living creatures and of the earth itself. However, the Christian worldview stops short of making all living things sacred, like the Buddhist worldview does.

2.1.2 Immanent critiques of karma

“The doctrine of karma claims that one’s actions in this and all previous lives have consequences. If they are right actions, then the consequences will be relatively desirable; if they are wrong actions, then the consequences will be undesirable. Each right or wrong action has its own set of consequences and there is no escaping them” (Yandell & Netland, 2009:119). Lim and Spaulding address the inconsistency of the teaching of karma in this way: “How unreasonable to propose that this karmic law (cause) came into being by chance, but that the results of it (effect), comes by choice!” (Lim & Spaulding, 2005:15). When one begins examining the Buddhist doctrine of karma, many problematic features arise. Here is a non-exhaustive list of penetrating questions by immanent critique:
❖ How can it be that a doctrine originated by chance and is able to accurately deal with the complex affairs (choices) of men and beast alike?
❖ How many life times would it take to wipe away the karmic debt of one nominally bad life?
❖ Where is the origin of the cycle of samsara and life itself (i.e. the original fall)?
❖ If in each subsequent life, more negative karma is accrued, how can this debt ever be released once and for all?
❖ How can one know if their karmic debt is growing, is paid off, or will ever be paid off?
❖ If there is no creator God, then why is life significant at all and why must life be protected and not taken?
❖ By helping someone else out of the consequences of their negative karma, will the person helped not just stay longer on the wheel of rebirth?
❖ If helping someone as aforementioned keeps them on the wheel of rebirth longer, does helping them ultimately just prolong their suffering? And how can prolonging someone else’s suffering bring the helper good karma?

A Buddhist might respond that helping suffering people will help the one suffering find enlightenment. These questions highlight some logical inconsistencies that pose a problem to the Western mind-set, that an eastern mind-set would not necessarily even see as a difficulty.

Another substantial, immanent critique of Buddhist teaching is in the logical inconsistency of the doctrine of karma in dealing with lower life forms. Lim and Spaulding (2005:60) propose this as one of the fatal flaws in the teaching of karma: “How could a mosquito or a mouse, a cat or a camel, have the same capacity of both knowing what is right and wrong, and then make deliberate moral choices to that effect?” If after one dies and one’s khandas form as an animal, how could one ever come back from that? Animals do not have a moral sense of judgment at all! Can a cat be held accountable for the murder of a mouse? According to the strict Buddhist principle, all life has value and thus ought not to be taken. There is also a level of agreement here with Christian Scriptures: The Bible endorses the worth
and value of creation, but makes a clear distinction between the life of animals and the life of human beings. The critique of the doctrine of karma comes from the fact that animals take life all the time. Does a crocodile accrue more negative karma with each meal? Can a crocodile accrue merit and move up the ladder of karma?

Even the benevolent system of Pattidana (merit transfer) cannot help an animal, or any lower life form. Pattidana is defined by the Princeton Dictionary of Buddhism (2014:636-637) as: “Referring to merit that has been obtained and then transferred (parivatta) to others; the term is thus translated into English as the ‘transfer of merit.’ The transfer of merit is one of the most common practices in Theravada Buddhism.” If merit cannot be made on behalf of the animal, and animals by their very nature will kill, and eat others, then how can one who descends to a lower life form ever return to humankind? Lim & Spaulding, (2005:104) clarify this issue: “This merit transfer is only valid for humans, not animals. So, purchasing and releasing birds or fish builds merit for the releaser but not for the birds or fish.” Doctrinally then it is a one-way trip and not a journey upward. Pattidana will be covered more in section 2.10 in regard to works-based salvation.

A final immanent critique looks at the logical fallacy in the law of karma. The endless nature of the wheel of Dharma, the immeasurable suffering that it produces creates hopelessness. If there is no end to suffering then why not just end this life, and roll the dice again? But the answer to this question takes us back to the logical fallacy, life is not to be taken according to Buddhist doctrine. “The moment the khandas break up selfhood disintegrates. The moment they come together, selfhood and suffering begin! The fact of existence is the origin of suffering, so the logical thing to do is to extinguish self! But to extinguish self would be to take life, which is forbidden, so one is caught up in the endless cycle” (Lim & Spaulding, 2005:58). What makes life special and worth anything if there is no God, and no image of God
imprinted upon man? If a creator God is completely removed from the equation, then why isn’t suicide an option?

A final immanent critique of the overall system of karma is that the Buddhist worldview will affirm absolute right and wrong. The Christian worldview will also affirm absolute right and wrong, hence there is a small point of agreement, however that is where the agreement ends. What the Buddhist worldview fails to do is state and defend where absolute right and wrong can originate from, in the absence of absolute deity. In the absence of absolute deity there is no originating force, principle or compelling factor in order to have and sustain absolute right and wrong.

2.1.3 Biblical response to the doctrine of karma

According to the Christian worldview, the sin-debt that has been systematically accumulated is insurmountable, when understanding that one can sin in action, thoughts or even attitudes. If mankind sinned when in the perfect conditions of the Garden of Eden, how much more will mankind sin in the imperfect fallen world that resulted from original sin? If our human nature is so corrupt and sinful that humanity’s default setting is a sinful one, how could the eight-fold path ever be enough to clear away the debt? Walter Martin in his landmark book Kingdom of the Cults makes this observation about the karmic debt: “The Samsarist (one who believes in the cycle of rebirths) is right in saying that man cannot atone for all of his sins in one lifetime. The Bible implies that man could not atone for his own sins if he had a thousand lifetimes (Romans 3:1-12)” (Martin, 2003:315).

The illustration that Theravada monks use, in defending the doctrine of karma, is a glass that is filthy. No matter how muddy the glass is, if one continues pouring in clean water, the contents will become clean if the process is frequently and diligently repeated. Their concept of clean water would be the four noble truths and diligently following the eightfold path.
The biblical revelation in Isaiah 64:6 illuminates the nature of human works: “All of us have become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous acts are like filthy rags; we all shrivel up like a leaf, and like the wind our sins sweep us away” (emphasis mine). This passage equates the very best of humanity’s good works to filthy menstrual rags by comparison to God’s perfect standard. From the Christian perspective, the fatal flaw to the water glass illustration is that there is no theoretical water “clean enough” to pour into the glass. Christian doctrine and human observation reveals that mankind is sinful from birth and desperately wicked. Jeremiah 17:9 reveals the actual state of the human heart: “The heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure. Who can understand it?” The doctrine of human sinfulness must be clearly presented and understood; otherwise the Buddhist position that good deeds are enough will make the gospel seem unnecessary.

The answer to the Theravada monk is that there is no human-water (self-effort) that is pure enough to clean the glass. No matter how much dirty water is poured into the dirty glass, the glass will remain dirty because there is no clean source to draw from, except from Jesus and the perfected work that was done on the cross of Calvary. No matter how much humankind searches for and desires “less-dirty-water” to clean out their own filthy glass, the only fountain that is clean at all is the one that comes from a pure and perfect source, and that is from Jesus. Unlike the glass analogy a human heart continues to add layer upon layer of filthiness to itself, it is inherent in human nature. Jesus’ own words in John 7:38 testifies to that effect—also using the analogy of water— “Whoever believes in me, as Scripture has said, rivers of living water will flow from within them.”

The Bible clearly demonstrates man’s depravity in the time of Noah. The pre-flood people had exceptionally long lives, but long life did not produce righteousness. In the time of Noah, the exact opposite was seen in that mankind’s every intent was evil. Genesis 6:5 states, “The LORD saw how great man’s wickedness on the Earth had become, and that every
inclination of the thoughts of his heart was *only evil all the time*” (emphasis mine). At that time mankind covered the face of the earth with violence and grieved the heart of God. According to Genesis 6:11, “Now the earth was corrupt in God’s sight and was *full of violence*” (emphasis mine). The evil that mankind has perpetrated in the past and continues to perpetuate cannot be cleansed with hundreds of thousands of lifetimes. The opposite is true: the more opportunities that mankind is given, the more sinful mankind becomes – choosing sin and lies over righteousness and truth.

Christian doctrine clearly teaches that God is a God of perfect justice. Accordingly, our actions have real world consequences in this life and in eternity. Galatians 6:7-8 states, “Do not be deceived: God cannot be mocked. A man reaps what he sows. Whoever sows to please their flesh, from the flesh will reap destruction; whoever sows to please the Spirit, from the Spirit will reap eternal life.” This is the closest idea to karma that a Christian can endorse as true. This principle of justice, consequences and responsibility is an area of agreement between Buddhism and Christian doctrine. The reason that this doctrine is different from Buddhism and inherently sound is that God who is the just judge is able to sufficiently and precisely carry out the *spiritual law* of sowing and reaping. Karma does not have such a compelling case in that it does not have a just judge at all, but merely an impersonal force. The ideological relationship between the law of sowing and reaping and karma is not a perfect counterpart, and yet it makes for an interesting bridge between Christian doctrine and the worldview of a Theravada Buddhist.

In concluding this section, it is critical that the Christian worker understand the ideas of karma, and how they are radically different from the doctrine of sin. In applying the teaching of sin and repentance, one must understand that karma and sin are not analogous with one another. Karma and sin are not compatible doctrines, and their respective cures are equally
incompatible. Dialoguing with Buddhists in this very critical teaching will help to reveal similarities and stark differences.

### 2.2 Many rebirths vs one life to repent

Theravada Buddhism has a specific understanding of the term *rebirth*, and the connotation is very negative. To the Theravada Buddhist, rebirth is an undesirable situation that brings limitless waves of suffering, with the implication that this rebirth is only good insofar as it advances one towards nirvana. In Christian theology, *rebirth* has the opposite meaning. Rebirth in Christian doctrine is when a person is regenerated by the Holy Spirit, justified by God the Father and saved by the Son of God – an extremely positive, life-affirming experience. The difficulty in comparing the respective worldviews is that the very same English word is laden with a huge disparity and depth of meaning in both systems. Thus, the word “*rebirth*” must be avoided by the evangelist or missionary, to avoid that inherent and inevitable misunderstanding that will be created.

In addition, rebirth to a Buddhist is qualitatively different to the Hindu concept of reincarnation. According to Hindu reincarnation, there is an eternal soul that can survive death, whereas the Theravada Buddhist concept of rebirth is that only the karmic debt carries from one life to the next, not an enduring soul or consciousness. Section 2.9 will deal with the contrasting ideas of having an eternal entity or not having an enduring self.

The huge difference in understanding of the doctrines of rebirth create a soteriological predicament. That predicament is how many lifetimes does one really have in order to attain salvation or nirvana? “The acceptance of the idea of rebirth removes much of the urgency of ‘getting things right’ within this lifetime. After all, one might always be in a better position in the next life to apprehend and act upon true doctrine” (Yandell & Netland, 2009:113). According to the Christian worldview, this poses an enormous problem in motivating people
as to their imminent need for salvation in this life. The biblical doctrine of soteriology is very specific: Hebrews 9:27-28 states: “Just as people are destined to die once, and after that to face judgment, so Christ was sacrificed once to take away the sins of many; and he will appear a second time, not to bear sin, but to bring salvation to those who are waiting for him.” In direct contrast, there is not the same level of urgency in the Buddhist worldview to achieve nirvana in this lifetime because of the millions of possible lifetimes that are available to reach the Buddhist ideal of enlightenment. The average Theravada Buddhist does not try to achieve nirvana in this life but merely makes strides towards enlightenment that will apparently take place in later lifetimes.

Yandell and Netland (2009:117) clarify the scope of the Theravada wheel of rebirth and just how significantly enormous Buddhists consider it to be: “We have lived and died millions of times. Unless we become enlightened, we will continue to do so forever. Moreover, this is not a happy state of affairs.” This doctrine to the Buddhist is the very reason that the teachings of Buddha must be adhered to, in order to escape the seemingly boundless suffering of mankind. This suffering in the Buddhist teaching is inescapable except for strict adherence to the Buddhist principles of monastic living and self-salvation. “For the adherent of the rebirth theory, the almost endless cycles of rebirth are necessary to cleanse the soul from tanha (sin), but for the Christian, ’The Blood of Jesus Christ, his Son cleanseth us from all sin’” (Martin, 2003:316-17).

Another predicament comes from the fact that the Christian concept of resurrection makes no sense to a Buddhist who desperately wants to escape this life and the consequences of karma. However, addressing the discrepancy between understanding eternal, sinless, suffering-free life and the great quenching of nirvana is essential in bringing a Buddhist to the correct understanding of salvation. “Christians do not look forward to rebirth; we look forward to resurrection, when Christ will return and clothe us in our glorified bodies so that we may
eternally serve and worship God” (Martin, 2003:318). The Buddhist desires to be free from the torturous suffering of this life, while the Christian looks forward to a day when current sufferings will end. In addition to this, Christian doctrine recognizes that God can and will use the suffering of this present world to bring about righteous and glorious results. This Christian doctrine is clarified in Romans 8:28-29: “And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose. For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers and sisters.” The good that is being spoken of here is primarily being conformed to the image of the Son of God, but also refers to becoming a useful servant and minister in the context of this broken world.

A hypothetical apologetic statement for further reflection in dialogue with a Theravada Buddhist is: “The consequences of my faith being wrong and yours being right would be I have a million chances to get to achieve nirvana. The consequences of your belief being wrong and mine being correct would be an eternity in hell, with no second chance for repentance!” Even though this apologetic and type of reasoning does not settle the question of truth, it does call for urgency in considering the claims of the Christian worldview. Yandell and Netland (2009:109) further this apologetic idea: “The theme in these passages is clear enough: Beliefs matter, and proper acceptance of the relevant teachings is essential for attaining the soteriological goal. The stakes are high. To put it in a particular idiom: there is a heaven to gain and a hell to shun; there is only one way to gain heaven and shun hell, but there are plenty of ways to shun heaven and gain hell.”

In concluding this section, “Buddha was desperately looking for a way out of suffering. He focused all of his energies on escaping from old age, sickness and death, which actually ended up in him ultimately wanting to escape from existence itself. By contrast, Christ came to help us to embrace life in its fullness” (Baker, 2009:122). Christians need to understand the
basic difference between how the Buddhist worldview uses the term “rebirth” and how radically differently it is from the Christian understanding of the same term. The term rebirth ought to be avoided when presenting the essential doctrines of sin and salvation with Theravada Buddhist peoples.

2.3 No personal, unchangeable creator God vs one author and perfecter of life

“It is important to remember that none of them [Buddhists] believe in the existence of a personal God” (Martin, 2003:303). The first mental shift toward personal salvation comes when a Theravada Buddhist considers the serious possibility that a “God” could actually exist. This is a huge mental shift for someone who has grown up in the teachings and culture of Theravada Buddhism. The Buddhist understanding of god is fundamentally different from the Christian worldview. A former Buddhist Theravada senior nun recounts: “God is in no way recognized, acknowledged or worshipped in Buddhism. Buddha’s teaching regarding God is very subtle and deceptive. He did not deny the existence of God, nor did he acknowledge the existence of God” (emphasis mine) (Baker, 2009:76).

In Theravada teachings, “God” as a Christian would define Him does not exist. Rather, many gods do exist that are also subject to the same laws that govern mankind. Theravada Buddhism teaches that these gods are subject to the laws of nature, karma, death and deterioration. Many Theravada Buddhists do believe in the existence of higher beings or gods, that which the Christian worldview would more closely identify as angels or demons. However, although Theravada Buddhists believe that there are beings that are powerful and higher than this plane of existence, that belief does not equate to the Christian concept of a personal, creative God. In his in-depth look at the culture and belief-systems of Theravada Buddhist in Sri Lanka Gombrich (1988:24) makes the following observation:

Gods are nothing to do with religion. For Buddhists, gods are powerful beings who can grant worldly favours, much like powerful people. Gods form a superhuman power
structure, and to discuss the existence or status of a particular god is much like
discussing where power lies in strata of human society far above one’s own. Buddhists
deny the existence of a Creator god, or any omnipotent or omniscient deity, or any being
in the world who is not subject to decay and death.

One of the largest differences in thinking between the Mahayana Buddhists and that of
the Theravada is the personhood of Buddha. Mahayana Buddhists believe in many Buddhas
and Bodhisattvas whereas: “Theravada Buddhists see Buddha as being a man only and not a
god. Second Theravada Buddhists insist that there can be only one Buddha” (Halverson,
1996:56). Theravada Buddhists hold to the uniqueness and exclusivity of Buddha, in the same
way in which Christians hold on to the uniqueness and exclusivity of Jesus. “Thus, there grew
up after him a cult that took refuge in him, the compassionate as well as enlightened one, even
more than it did in his teaching, so difficult to understand and practice” (Noss, 1956:182).
Theravada Buddhists do not believe that the Buddha was a god, but only an enlightened man
and great teacher. By contrast, Evangelical Christians resolutely believe and teach that Jesus
was in fact both fully divine and fully human.

To a Buddhist a creator God is not only incomprehensible but incompatible with their
Buddhism, our ideas of God and Soul are false and empty. The teachings of Theravada
Buddhism typically are understood as being incompatible with belief in a creator God or
supreme being.” This creates difficulty when trying to present the gospel in a culture that
outright rejects an eternal deity and the doctrine of creation. Its rejection of a purposeful
creation is one of those deeply rooted tenets that make Buddhism radically contrary to that of
the Christian worldview. To illustrate this difficulty: in the Thai language, there is not a word
that accurately conveys the biblical concept of “God.” To further compound this difficulty in
understanding God in a Thai context, Lim & Spaulding, (2005:52) illustrate:

Concerning love, there is a Thai proverb “Danger comes from love” or filth comes from
love. Therefore, the Buddhist standard is to eliminate love completely. Any who has
severed himself from all love and does not love his children, wife, his money, his possessions, not even himself, is on a high level of attainment in Buddhism, but Christian ministers say, “God so loved the world.” Buddhists hear this and think, “Oh how pitiful; this God is full of unwholesome passion. He is still very sinful.

This illustrates the extreme level of challenge in presenting God to a culture that does not understand God or His love that is such an essential element of His nature. The culture that Buddhism presents within the Thai context sets itself directly against God’s love, and creates a huge barrier to understanding and faith. “In either case, Buddhism is nontheistic, affirming no God; therefore, any affirmation of a personal God who undergirds the universe is denied. The “destiny” of a Buddhist is the “nothingness” or “emptiness” of nirvana, not the fullness (pleroma) of the New Creation” (Tennent, 2010: 79).

2.3.1 Worldview of change

Another unique aspect of the fundamental presuppositions of the Buddhist worldview is its view of change. The Buddhist worldview believes that all things change – they have no concept for a being that is not subject to change. “All things are constantly changing, and change cannot be stopped” (Devega & Guarkee, 2012:86). The Buddha would use the example of water flowing under a bridge, although it may look the same, the water that was there a moment ago is gone completely, and each time you step into a river it is a different river. What this means about life is that there is no unchangeable thing or God that is outside of change. Ironically it is an absolute denial of absolutes. This absolute denial of absolutes creates a logical fallacy and consequently a self-defeating statement.

This specific tenet makes explaining God, who is unchanging, very perplexing to the Theravada Buddhist worldview. Elizabeth Harris articulates this challenging thought in her response to Buddhism: “There is nothing that is unchanging in the human person, he (Buddha) declared. The human person is a verb and not a noun. It is continually changing as five factors interlock with each other in a continuum of cause and effect” (Schmidt-Leukel, 2005:40).
The biblical response to the Buddhist doctrine of change is a simple one. God is the Creator of time and is therefore not subject to space-time like all of creation. Although there is much change in the world, there are things that stay the same. God’s inherent nature does not change. God’s attributes like His love and His truthfulness are irrevocably static. According to James 1:16 – 18, “Don’t be deceived, my dear brothers and sisters. Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows. He chose to give us birth through the word of truth, that we might be a kind of first fruits of all he created” (emphasis mine). This doctrine can also be seen in 1 Samuel 15:29: “He who is the Glory of Israel does not lie or change his mind; for he is not a human being, that he should change his mind.”

In the concluding of this section, it is critical that Christians understand the multi-layered difficulty in presenting God in a Theravada context, because of the radically different Buddhist concept of the existence and ultimate irrelevance of “gods.” It is a critical mental shift for a Theravada Buddhist to go from a practically godless outlook to one that allows the possibility of the eternal “God”. After that shift, has taken place the gospel will be much easier for the Theravada Buddhist to accept. Another essential change is when a Theravada Buddhist comes to understand, in principle, that there can be things that do not change.

2.4 Four noble truths vs four spiritual laws

Theravada Buddhists believe that suffering can have an end, and that the end of suffering should be pursued at all costs. The Buddha taught the four noble truths as a pathway to end the suffering of humanity. The four noble truths are foundational to the Buddhist worldview and their way of life. Yandell & Netland (2009:15-16) quote the Buddha’s first sermon in saying, “The noble truth of pain: birth is painful, old age is painful, sickness is
painful, death is painful, sorrow, lamentation, dejection, and despair are painful. Contact with unpleasant things is painful, not getting what one wishes is painful.” The Buddha was setting out his fundamental worldview by framing human existence with pain, sorrow and dejection. He had likely witnessed much of this pain and sorrow, so he laid out the four-fold path in order to end suffering. The four noble truths are:

1. Life is suffering;
2. Suffering is caused by craving;
3. Suffering can have an end;
4. There is a path that leads to the end of suffering.

This was one of the Buddha’s primary teachings and it is expressed in all the forms of Buddhism. It is a very logical flow of teaching, and is easy to follow. Each of these noble truths shall be looked at separately.

Bill Bright, founder of Campus Crusade for Christ, set out four spiritual laws (Bright, B. 2007) and he did so as a methodical way of looking at Christian salvation. His Four Spiritual Laws are a basic understanding of Evangelical Christian soteriology and a basic instruction on how one can be saved. They stem from an overview of the book of Romans, that outlines what it means to be saved. Although the four spiritual laws are not completely exhaustive, they are an excellent witnessing methodology for leading someone to an understanding of the need for salvation. Moreover, these laws make an interesting and fruitful contrast with the Buddha’s teaching on the four noble truths.

To parallel Buddha’s four noble truths, Bill Bright’s Four Spiritual Laws will be used to illustrate the difference between the Buddhist path to end suffering and Christ’s road to salvation. Although Bright’s Four Spiritual Laws were not specifically designed for use in
engaging Buddhists, his Four Spiritual Laws directly answer the rhetorical questions intended by the Buddha. The Four Spiritual Laws are:

1. God loves you and offers a wonderful plan for your life.
2. Man is sinful and separated from God. Therefore, he cannot know and experience God's love and plan for his life.
3. Jesus Christ is God's only provision for man's sin. Through Him you can know and experience God's love and plan for your life.
4. We must individually receive Jesus Christ as Saviour and Lord; then we can know and experience God's love and plan for our lives.

The next four sub-sections will compare and contrast the Buddha’s Four Noble Truths and Bill Bright’s Four Spiritual Laws.

2.4.1 Life is suffering

Suffering is key to understanding the Buddhist worldview. “Suffering is not mere mental or emotional pain but something far more intrinsic to our nature” (Valea, 2009:90). In trying to grasp this fundamental Buddhist doctrine, there are three subsequent lessons from this first teaching that life is suffering. In Pali the three teachings would be: *dukkha* (suffering), *anicca* (impermanence) and *anatta* (no-self).

2.4.1.1 Dukkha

The first doctrinal teaching that stems from the first noble truth is that suffering (*dukkha*) is inevitable and is pervasive in the human race. In a discourse from the Pali cannon, Buddha says this to his monks: “This, monks, is called an uninstructed worldling who is attached to birth, aging and death; who is attached to sorrow, lamentation, pain, dejection and despair; who is attached to suffering, I say” (Bodhi, 2005:31). The Buddha goes on to assert in *Sallatha Sutta* 36:6- that men have two separate pains, a physical one and a mental one. Part of

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the Buddha’s goal in training his monks was to enable them not only to defeat mental pain but to become completely detached from everyone and everything in this world in order to attain the permanent state of nirvana. Sutta 36:6 from the Pali canon says this about suffering and what the end result of the four noble truths is:

If he feels a pleasant thing, he feels it detached. If he feels a painful feeling, he feels it detached. This, monks, is called a noble disciple who is detached from birth, aging, and death; who is detached from sorrow, lamentation, pain, dejection, and despair; who is detached from suffering I say. This, monks, is the distinction, the disparity, the difference between the instructed noble disciple and the un instructed worldling (Bodhi, 2005:31).

To what extent is this essential lesson from teaching of suffering correct? Life can be filled with suffering, but is life always suffering? Does that mean there is nothing in this life apart from suffering? Kiyoshi Tsuchiya, a Chinese Buddhist says this in regard to the realities of this life: “My life is a brief series of rather insignificant accidents, in which, however, there are certain experiences of joy and happiness, sadness and suffering. When it comes to an end, I would feel simultaneously sad and relieved” (Schmidt-Leukel, 2005:54). Kiyoshi Tsuchiya who identifies himself as being a Buddhist heavily influenced by Taoism, is easily willing to propose that this life does not only consist of suffering, and yet the inevitable conclusion of this worldview is that he is not able to attach any ultimate, objective meaning to his own existence. This immanent critique may be a way to provoke some thoughtful inter-religious discussion. The Buddha held that all of life is suffering, but experience and life testifies that not all human existence is suffering. Not all experiences are negative or painful.

2.4.1.2 Annica

The second lesson associated with the first noble truth is that of annica. Theravada Buddhists call this the doctrine of impermanence. “Everything is in constant transformation, becoming something different from what it was a moment ago” (Valea, 2009:90). The Buddha looked at all the change around him and assumed that all things are constantly subject to change
over time. However, is this truly representative of reality? Even the Mahayana Buddhist Thich Nhat Hanh (1995:120) asserts: “When we touch the ground, we feel the stability of the Earth and feel confident. When we observe the steadiness of the sunshine, the air, and the trees, we know that we can count on the sun to rise each day and the air and trees to be there tomorrow.” This well-known Mahayana Buddhist recognizes that even though change does take place, not everything is impermanent. According to the teaching of impermanence: “Any aspect of our human nature, any aspect of our world, anything we can imagine is nothing but a momentary product and a momentary cause in an infinite chain of becoming” (Valea, 2008:90).

Is it objectively true that all things are as the Buddha described them, like changing water under a bridge? Does this lesson from the first noble truth authentically, universally apply to all things everywhere? If this primary lesson of teaching is correct, then nothing would be consistent. This doctrine is an absolute statement. In order to disprove any absolute statement, one only needs to point to one provable example that absolutely contradicts the absolute statement. As a prime example, God is ever constant. Moreover, gravity on earth and a whole host of other natural laws are constant and unchanging. Not all things are in constant flux like water under a bridge. The doctrine of annica is another teaching that does not accurately represent what reality is actually like. Again, this is a point that can spur on some inter-faith discussion about the nature of reality and experience.

2.4.1.3 Anatta

The third doctrine that is associated with the first noble truth is that of anatta, the doctrine that there is no self. The basic notion of this teaching that flows from the first noble truth is that there are not really persons (puggala) in the first place, and holding on to the idea that there are actually persons is what keeps humankind in the perpetual bondage of rebirth. Does the doctrine of anatta match reality? Are there really no persons to be saved or to live or die in the first place? The consequences of this doctrine clash violently against other Buddhist
teachings and have far reaching implications for the Buddhist practitioner. The doctrine of *anatta* will be assessed and evaluated more closely in section 2.9 where the question of individual identity will be fully unpacked, and in section 2.9.1 a thoroughly biblical response will be presented.

An overall critique of these three doctrines comes from the Buddha’s own accepted teaching: “Furthermore he advised that each person should think for himself on matters of doctrine, cross referencing views and opinions against scriptures before deciding whether or not to accept them” (Keown, 2000:27). The Buddha did not nominate a successor and thus expected his followers to think and reason for themselves. So, after inspecting the first noble truth and the three essential lessons that come from the first noble truth, why is it that none of the teachings match up with what reality is essentially like? What is the Christian evaluation and response to the first noble truth?

**2.4.1.4 Christian Response to the first noble truth**

The Buddha’s first noble truth says, “life is suffering,” and the Christian response is “God loves you and offers a wonderful plan for your life” (Bright, 2007). The Christian position is that life is not random, or in constant flux, but is changing as God moves time forward, towards the very climax of history. As Bright would say, there is a plan of God in the midst of this changing World, and that plan includes both the Christian witness and those that still need to hear the true gospel. Christianity maintains that there will be suffering in this world, and that suffering is caused by the fall of man and the volitional sin that mankind brought into this world. Moreover, not all things change, for God, his love and his laws are ever constant. Likewise, Christianity teaches that there are in fact real persons, created in God’s divine image, fallen and marred by sin, but redeemable and valuable in the hands of their maker.
Christian doctrine does not deny or lessen the very real truth that there is much suffering in this life, but affirms that even in the midst of suffering the plans and purposes of God can and will be fulfilled and sanctification can take place in the life of the believer. There is a positive and confident change called sanctification that takes place as the disciple of Christ becomes substantially more like Jesus.

2.4.2 Suffering is caused by craving

While teaching a local headman about desire, the Buddha is quoted as having said this: “In this way too, headman, it can be understood: ‘Whatever suffering arises [is], all that is rooted in desire, has desire as its source; for desire is the root of suffering’” (Bodhi, 2005:93). Per Theravada Buddhism, because human beings crave that which does not exist – permanence, they are bound to the cycle of life, death and rebirth. However, since there is no soul, or permanent self, the only thing that does in fact travel is the karmic consequence of the life that has been lived. “Humans are craving for such things (sensual desire and existence) because of their belief in the permanence of self and of the world” (Valea, 2009:93). “Craving fuels suffering in the way that wood fuels fire: in a vivid metaphor the Buddha spoke of all human experience as ablaze with desire” (Keown, 2000:49). Valea identifies this craving as a temporary association of five particular aggregates – khandas. These five khandas per Valea (2008:93) are the body, feeling, cognition, mental constructions and consciousness. “The states of mind cultivated in a lifetime, or rather states of mind that are allowed to overwhelm one, will dictate subsequent lives” (Valea, 2009:95). It is craving that causes rebirth, and according to Buddhist teaching, with rebirth comes more pain and more craving.

It is essential to understand how Theravada Buddhists define craving and desire. Keown (2000:49) outlines the three forms of craving that make up tanha: “Three forms of desire define tanha: sensual pleasure, thirst for existence and the desire to destroy.” All of these in the Buddhist worldview are erroneous desires that chain the human race to the wheel of rebirth.
2.4.2.1 Christian response to the second noble truth

While the second noble truth is that suffering is caused by craving, the Christian response that comes from Bill Bright’s second spiritual law is: Suffering is caused by man being sinful and being separated from God. Therefore, he cannot know and experience God's love and plan for his life. The Christian response affirms that desire or craving can be negative. However, the essential problem stems from the craving of the sinful nature as a result of the fall of mankind. The Christian worldview does not teach that all craving is evil, because humankind still craves a relationship with God. This desire for God and for objective good harkens back to the way that life was in the Garden of Eden, before the fall. This desire for attachment to God and to fellow human-beings is not wrong.

Christian doctrine teaches the opposite of the Theravada Buddhist belief about cutting oneself off from all desire. To cut oneself off from all desire, according to Christian doctrine, is to reject an essential part of the very image of God within humankind. 1 Peter 2:1-2 says, “Therefore, putting aside all malice and all deceit and hypocrisy and envy and all slander, like new-born babies, long for the pure milk of the word, so that by it you may grow in respect to salvation.” The Greek word here for “long for” is epipotheō that can be translated “crave for” or “to strongly desire.” This illustrates the biblical truth that there are in fact desires that ought to be abstained from such as, malice, deceit, hypocrisy, envy and all slander. However, there are things that human beings, created in the likeness of God, ought to see as healthy and to be craved. Scripture teaches that it is good to eagerly desired the pure milk of the Word of God and a relationship with God. According to Matthew 5:6, “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.” There are many things in the Christian Scriptures that Christians are called to deeply long for and desire: righteousness, God’s word, fellowship and the Spiritual gifts. All of these things in the right place create a life that is not
detached from the world but attached to God in a way that makes them eternally valuable and Christ-like.

### 2.4.3 Suffering can have an end

The third noble truth gives the Buddhist answer to the problem of endless suffering and rebirth. The answer is the complete abstinence of craving which cuts off karma from having anything to be reborn through. “Once craving is stopped, the chain is broken, and one attains the only permanent state, that of nirvana” (Valea, 2009:96). This is the ultimate Theravada answer to the problem of suffering and rebirth: to enter the stream to nirvana. “What is extinguished, in fact, is the triple fire of greed, hatred, and delusion which leads to rebirth” (Keown, 2000:52).

The Buddha refused to define nirvana and simply stated that one must achieve it, not understand it. Nirvana is not a place that can be compared to the Christian ideal of heaven, and Buddha refused to define it in fact: “The Buddha discouraged speculation about the nature of nirvana and emphasized the need to strive for its attainment” (Keown, 2000:53). If the Buddha had been enlightened and understood all things, why could he not simply and efficiently explain the nature of nirvana to those honestly inquiring? The Buddhist would likely respond to this critique by saying that it’s not the Buddha’s ignorance that prevented him from being able to describe Nirvana, but rather because of nirvana’s intrinsic ineffability. Nirvana will be further discussed in section 2.8.

#### 2.4.3.1 Christian response to the third noble truth

The Christian response (Bright, 2007) to the end of suffering is this: “Suffering can have an end, through Jesus Christ as God's only provision for man's sin. Through Jesus you can know and experience God's love and plan for your life.” God has a plan to end suffering,
and that plan is after Jesus has finally defeated death once and for all, but that plan begins by faith in Jesus, here on earth.

2.4.4 There is a path that leads to the end of suffering

According to Theravada Buddhism, the only way in which to accomplish this ending of suffering is by the eightfold path, with its three categories. The eightfold path is: right understanding (views), right reserve, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness and the right meditation (concentration). “The eightfold path is known as the middle way because it steers a course between a life of indulgence and one of harsh austerity” (Keown, 2000:54). To the Christian, one must also, in a different sense, seek the middle path. Christ urged his followers not to live a life of legalism like the Pharisees, or to live a hedonistic life of self-pleasure—but to rejoice in the God-centred life of self-denial, righteousness, and being a new person in Christ. That is totally different from the Buddhist concept of relying on oneself to attain something that will not be you anymore:

The result of perfect practice is attaining enlightenment and becoming an *arahat*, one who has completed training, conquered suffering, abandoned ignorance and craving, achieved freedom from rebirth and thus reached the supreme wisdom the Buddha himself had reached centuries ago (Valea, 2009:100).

This also brings out the Buddhist desire for eradication of craving and attachment to this world. Theravada Buddhists believe that this type of craving is evil. At the heart of Buddhism is the desire to end suffering, which is a common desire for most of mankind and for most organized religions. “Desire in itself is not evil. It is desire to affirm the lower self, to live in it, cling to it, identify oneself with it, instead of the universal self, that is evil” (Humphreys, 1971:91-92).

2.4.4.1 The Christian response to the fourth noble truth

The Christian response to the end of suffering is simply outlined in Bill Bright’s fourth spiritual law: “There is a path that leads to the end of suffering, we must individually receive
Jesus Christ as Saviour and Lord; then we can know and experience God's love and plan for our lives.” Only when a life is hidden in God will it be truly free from suffering in the next life. Romans 8:28-29 teaches: “And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose. For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers and sisters.” This biblical truth explains that in this life there will be suffering, and yet, God will redeem the suffering of His people in such a way not only for it to be bearable but for it to produce righteousness and good out of situations that only before produced evil.

2.4.5 In summation:

“Life is suffering, but God loves you and offers a wonderful plan for your life.”

“Suffering is caused by man craving sinfulness and being separated from God. Therefore, man cannot know and experience God's love and plan for his life.”

“Suffering can have an end by Jesus Christ as God's only provision for man's sin. Through Him you can know and experience God's love and plan for your life.”

“There is a path that leads to the end of suffering, we must individually receive Jesus Christ as Saviour and Lord; then we can know and experience God's love and plan for our lives.”

Understanding the four noble truths on a deep level and the out-workings of the eightfold path is essential for all Christians working among Buddhist people groups. Having a firm grip on Christian doctrine and how Christian doctrine compares to the Buddhist teaching and thinking is one of the first steps at successfully evangelizing Buddhists.

2.5 Meditation vs prayer

One of the fundamental observances of Buddhism is the practice of “right meditation.” It forms a critical part of the eightfold path that is supposed to lead one to enlightenment. The Christian doctrine of prayer is completely different to the Theravada Buddhist concept of
meditation. Ultimately the goal of meditation is detachment from all things, and the goal of prayer is not detachment from the world but appropriate attachment to God and His purposes within the world.

The *Dhammapada* (2006:96) says this about meditation: “There is no meditative absorption for one without insight. There is no insight for one without meditative absorption. With both, one is close to Nirvana.” The Buddhist ideal is that insight will bring one into meditative absorption, and meditative absorption will grant one more insight. So, meditation is one of the keys to success in the Eightfold path of Enlightenment. The *Dhammapada* (2006:48) also says this in defining not only the benefits of Buddhist meditation but also what it consists of: “Even the gods envy The Awakened Ones, the mindful ones, the wise ones who are intent on meditation and delight in the peace of renunciation.” To the Theravada Buddhist meditation is a spiritual exercise of renouncing all craving and desire, in order to become one of the “Awakened Ones.” It is one of the ways that Theravada Buddhists find peace.

A clear distinction between Buddhist meditation and Christian prayer comes from the dissimilar focus of the separate disciplines. The focus of Buddhist meditation is that of self, liberating oneself from false beliefs, liberating oneself from the passions of *Tanca*. The purpose of Christian prayer is connectedness -- connecting to God, and embracing God’s kingdom and seeing that kingdom come to Earth. The witness of a Buddhist nun who came to Christ has this to say about meditation and prayer: “Buddhist meditation is not at all like Christian prayer and cannot in any way be likened to it. Christian prayer has God firmly at the foundation of it. The relationship between God and the believer is central; he relates to us as we relate to him” (Baker, 2009:99). In the Theravada discipline meditation takes a central role: “Buddhist meditation uses the mind as the main way to try and understand truth and escape suffering. Its strong hold over me had been primarily over my mind and it had blinded me to the truth” (Baker, 2009:113).
A testimony from an anonymous high-ranking Buddhist\(^4\) at the largest Wat in South Africa who had converted to Christianity, testifies that her primary reason for doing so was the vast difference between Buddhist meditation and Christian prayer. When this high-ranking Buddhist listened to the honest prayers of Christians, and their sincerity and care for others in prayer, she came to faith in Jesus Christ. It was the radically different nature of Christian prayer; the focus that she saw was not on oneself but on others. This other-centeredness was a powerful witness to her and started her journey to becoming a Christian. Prayer is one of the most essential tools for a successful evangelism and conversion. Conversely to the Buddhist, meditation is essential in one seeking enlightenment and nirvana.

2.5.1 The biblical response to the teaching of meditation

The summarized purpose of meditation in Theravada Buddhism is detachment. Whereas for the Christian, the purpose of prayer is the opposite, the filling of mind and heart with God and His Word. Psalms 1:2 states, “His delight is in the law of the LORD, and on his law, he meditates day and night.”

The Bible clearly teaches that Christians ought to engage in prayer. James 5:16 says, “Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous person is powerful and effective.” And further Ephesians 6:18 says, “And pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests. With this in mind, be alert and always keep on praying for all the Lord’s people.” This encourages Christians to engage in thoughtful and alert prayer for each other. Furthermore, Philippians 4:6 says, “Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God.” The Christian is even encouraged to pray for unbelievers and people in authority, for as 1 Timothy 1-3 says, “I urge, then, first of all, that

\(^4\) To protect this woman’s identity, her name is absent from this paper.
petitions, prayers, intercession and thanksgiving be made for all people— for kings and all those in authority, that we may live peaceful and quiet lives in all godliness and holiness. This is good, and pleases God our Saviour.”

In conclusion, Buddhist meditation and Christian prayer are not similar disciplines, and cannot be equated with each other. Christians ought to make the distinction between meditation and prayer. Christians need to use prayer as a preparation for ministry and as a ministry in reaching Theravada Buddhists.

2.6 Craving (desire) is the problem vs sinful nature as the problem

To the Buddhist, tanha or desire which can also be understood as a metaphorical thirst, is the overarching human problem. “A basic Buddhist theme is that our most fundamental disease is a kind of ignorance. The cure for this is the right understanding” (Yandell & Netland, 2009:110).

This takes us briefly back to the third noble truth that there is a way to eliminate that tanha—that thirst for things that are not good. “The third noble truth: The way to liberate oneself from suffering is by eliminating all desire. We must stop craving that which is impermanent” (Halverson, 1996:58). Likewise, the Dhammapada (2006:89-90) says this regarding cutting oneself off from desires:

A strong bond, say the wise, is infatuation with jewels, and ornaments. And longing for children and spouse – that bond is weighty, elastic, and hard to loosen. Having cut even this, they go forth, free from longing, abandoning sensual pleasures. Those attached to passion are caught in a river [of their own making] like a spider caught in its own web.

The Dhammapada encourages the adherent to cut oneself off not just from ugly realities like evil desires and ignorance but also from the passion that exist between spouse and the love between parent and child. The Buddha is believed to have done this very thing when he became a mendicant – he left his wife and child to go and find enlightenment.
There is a distinct difference between this teaching in Buddhism and that of the Christian worldview. Yandell and Netland (2009:106) explain the difference very well:

In Christianity, the ‘illness’ is sin; the causal conditions involve our misuse of the gift of freedom in an effort to become free from God; the disease is curable; and the cure requires God’s gracious, redemptive action in Jesus Christ – his life, death for our sins and resurrection – and our repentance and trust in God. In Buddhism, by contrast, the ‘disease’ is the unsatisfactory nature of existing transitorily and dependently; the cause is that we mistakenly suppose ourselves to be persons who endure through time; the disease is curable; and the cure requires the occurrence of an esoteric, profound experience in which the calm lack of attachment is accompanied by deep acceptance of a Buddhist account of how things really are.

2.6.1 The biblical response to cutting oneself off from craving

To the Christian the right desire and attachment is the solution, not the eliminating of desire. “Jesus taught that the solution to suffering is not in eliminating desire but in having the right desire (Matthew 5:6)” (Halverson, 1996:63).

The Buddha taught that desire for permanence and desire to have a permanent self is what must be fundamentally rejected in order to be free from the wheel of rebirth and karma. “It is the Buddha’s view that the belief in a permanent substantial self is not only false, but also leads to selfishness and egoism, which, in turn make the world so dissatisfactory for everyone” (Yandell & Netland, 2009:19). The very opposite is true for the Christian. Jesus said in Matthew 16:26, “What good will it be for someone to gain the whole world, yet forfeit their soul? Or what can anyone give in exchange for their soul?” The soul is not only valuable, but something to be guarded, protected and nurtured per biblical doctrine. With a correct view of the soul and with biblical passion, the Christian in praxis initiates all sorts of wonderful, self-sacrificing good for all of humanity.

In conclusion, the Buddhist and the Christian agree that desiring the wrong thing is the cause for much pain and suffering and sorrow, but disagree on the root of suffering and the
solution as to how to fix the problem. There is also a fundamental difference between the two
worldviews about desire.

2.7 Syncretism vs exclusivism

Syncretism, or the “intermarrying” of worldview systems, is something that is prevalent
in much of the laity in Theravada communities. Syncretism makes evangelizing Theravada
Buddhist laity increasingly complex and difficult. The trend with populations of lay Buddhists
is not to eradicate previous belief systems but to blend with them, and keep many of the
fundamental tenets thereof. Keown (1996:74) articulates:

When Buddhism spreads it tends not to eradicate existing beliefs but incorporates them,
along with local gods and spirits; into its own cosmology. It is quite common to find
Buddhists at the village level turning to local gods for solutions to everyday problems
– such as curing an illness or finding a marriage partner – and turning to Buddhism for
answers to the larger questions about human destiny.

Corduan (1998:243) while remarking about the vast difference between Sri Lankan
praxis of Buddhism and the Thai praxis of Buddhism makes this striking statement:
“Throughout the history of its development, Buddhism has been nothing if not adaptable.”
Furthermore Corduan (1998:247) makes the comparisons between the lay person and the
Buddhist sage: “Whereas Buddhist sages see themselves on the way to the personal extinction
of nirvana, laypersons pick up the pieces of their lives in the hopes of good fortune and a better
incarnation. No wonder that on the lay level, the history of Buddhism is a history of
syncretism!”

The system of syncretism and adaptability is totally different than the idea of
exclusivism. It is true of much of the laity of Buddhism that takes a very pluralistic and
syncretistic view of soteriology. “But it is said that there are 84,000 Dharma doors, doors of
teaching. If you are lucky enough to find a door, it would not be very Buddhist to say that yours
is the only door. In fact, we have to open even more doors for future generations” (Hanh,
1995:39). This idea by Hanh, a Mahayana Buddhist, shows how open the Buddhist laity are to new teachings, but to the Christian there is only one true door for salvation.

Corduan (1998:16) correctly identifies the Evangelical Christian perspective by saying: “Evangelical Christianity does not recognize any other world religion as a valid way to God.” Exclusivism says that two opposing truths cannot both be correct at the same time, one must be true and the other must be false. This is not necessarily true of the eastern thinking - that allows for alternative, opposing views to both simultaneously be true, violating what is often termed as the law of non-contradiction.

Evangelical Christianity makes the exclusive claim that Christ is the only way to true salvation. “That Christianity is exclusivistic in this sense is widely acknowledged and often deplored” (Yandell & Netland, 2009:107). The view of a strict Theravada Buddhist would be the equal and opposite. Yandell & Netland (2009:109) quote the Dalai Lama in saying: “This kind of moksha or nirvana is only explained in the Buddhist scriptures, and is only achieved through Buddhist practice.” Therefore, Theravada Buddhism, as experienced by the Arahats also holds to a form of exclusivism. Nirvana, which is the highest ideal, is only attainable if one becomes an Arahat, which is only possible through Buddhist teachings and strict Buddhist adherence to the Eightfold path. Buddhists recognize many pathways to an improved life but only one that leads to enlightenment and eventual nirvana. A Theravada Buddhist acknowledges that true liberation is exclusively attained by strict adherence to Buddhist principles (four noble truths and the eightfold path).

Tennent (2002:17) correctly defines the three separate and decisive claims that Christian Exclusivists make about ultimate reality:

First exclusivists affirm the unique authority of Jesus Christ as the apex of revelation and the norm by which all other beliefs must be critiqued. Second, exclusivists affirm that the Christian faith centers around the proclamation of the historical death and
resurrection of Jesus Christ as the decisive event in human history. Third, the exclusivists believe that salvation comes through repentance and faith in Christ’s work on the cross and that no one can be saved without an explicit act of repentance and faith based on the knowledge of Christ.

These three exclusivist statements summarize accurately the position of the Evangelical Christian. These tenets come from solid biblical hermeneutics and form a framework for the Christian in engaging in inter-faith dialogues.

2.8 Enlightenment and (eventual nirvana) vs heaven

A very significant difference between the Buddhist worldview and the Christian worldview is the difference between nirvana and heaven. The Theravada Buddhist believes: “The universe has no beginning and comprises three broad realms – the heavens, the world we inhabit, and hells – each of which in turn can be subdivided into realms” (Yandell & Netland, 2009:21). In paraphrasing Keown (2000:30-35), Buddhists believe in thirty-one levels of existence: 26 levels of heaven; 2 levels of earth; 1 level for ghosts; 1 level for animals; 1 level of hell with many rooms – hot hells and cold hells. Theravada Buddhists believe that life is an endless cruel cycle that one needs to escape, and that nirvana is the only permanent solution to the endless wheel of samsara.

When defining nirvana, it is literally translated as “quenching” or “blowing out.” To the Theravada Buddhist, nirvana is not “becoming nothing,” but permanently exiting the horrendous wheel of suffering and rebirth. The Princeton Dictionary of Buddhism (2014:589) defines nirvana or nibbana as: “In Sanskrit, 'extinction’ the earliest and most common term describing the soteriological goal of the Buddhist path.”

Nirvana can only be achieved through virtue and practical wisdom: “Nirvana then is a fusion of virtue and wisdom” (Keown, 200:45). The very difficult thing in speaking on the
nature, scope or even the quality of nirvana is that Buddhists claim it is undefinable: “One thing that makes the subject of nirvana difficult to discuss is the claim that it is ineffable, that is, that it is literally true of nirvana that no concepts apply to it” (Yandell & Netland, 2009:142). Even Buddha himself would not answer questions on the nature of nirvana, but rather tried to refocus his Arahats to achieving nirvana, rather than speculating about its nature.

“Theravada Buddhists believe that only a few people will be able to achieve nirvana in this lifetime. However, those who remain will be reborn and have the opportunity to continue along the path to enlightenment” (Devega & Guarkee, 2012:88). From the Christian perspective, this creates a significant challenge -- in that those who believe in Theravada Buddhism believe that they have thousands or even millions of life cycles to eventually achieve nirvana. This means that there is little motivation to decide in this lifetime, if one has almost unlimited lifetimes to achieve nirvana. The Christian worldview stresses the exact opposite as referenced in Hebrews 9:27-28: “Just as people are destined to die once, and after that to face judgment, so Christ was sacrificed once to take away the sins of many; and he will appear a second time, not to bear sin, but to bring salvation to those who are waiting for him.”

Nirvana is a very important concept to understand in approaching the worldview of a Buddhist. “A possible answer is that ‘attaining nirvana’ involves annihilation of what the Buddhist tradition typically take ordinary talk of ‘persons’ to be misleadingly referring to (the sequence of bundles of mental states ends), and that is all. But Buddhism generally has been highly critical of this way of describing nirvana” (Yandell & Netland 2009:141). The word literally means quenching, or extinguishing – the termination of desire and attachment to this world.

A few questions by immanent critique are:

❖ Where did this non-ending cycle come from?
❖ What or who initiated it, how is it that it can be if it is not created or sustained by something or someone?
❖ Why is nirvana ineffable? Why do no concepts in this life apply to nirvana?
❖ If nirvana is ineffable, how can one know if it is desirable to attain it?
❖ How can one be sure that nirvana is a noble goal at all?

2.8.1 The biblical teaching of heaven as opposed to “eternal quenching”

To the Christian, Heaven is something exceptional, real and eternal. The Christian worldview teaches that Christ will wipe away every tear and there will be no pain or suffering in heaven. This truth is proclaimed in two separate places in Scripture: Revelation 7:17 says, “For the Lamb at the centre of the throne will be their shepherd; he will lead them to springs of living water. And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.” According to Revelation 21:3-4, “And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, “Look! God’s dwelling place is now among the people, and he will dwell with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.” This truth should be the inspiring linchpin to help draw a Theravada Buddhist into a life-giving relationship with Jesus – the understanding that Jesus will end all suffering, but that it is in heaven that it is effectuated not here on earth.

In concluding this section, there is a level of common understanding with the Buddhist, the cravings and desires that come from the world are not good for mankind, but the Scriptures endorse living forever in God’s presence as the good one must desire, not the complete lack of inordinate desire. 1 John 2:15-17 says this: “Do not love the world or anything in the world. If anyone loves the world, love for the Father is not in them. For everything in the world—the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life—comes not from the Father but from the world. The world and its desires pass away, but whoever does the will of God lives forever.”
2.9 Absence (loss) of individual identity vs endorsement of individual salvation and worth

The Buddha in his teaching was very clear that persons, individuals or even souls do not exist as enduring beings but are merely a collection of aggregates: “The Theravada tradition has emphasized what it regards as the central truths of the Buddha’s teachings – that there is no atman or self; the world is impermanent, and all its existence is characterized by suffering or sorrow; and that liberation from rebirth, or nirvana, is the goal” (Yandell & Netland, 2009:28).

Elizabeth Harris in presenting the differences between Christian doctrine and Buddhist doctrine summarizes the Buddhist position of anatta (not-self): “Release yourself from promoting, protecting and pampering an ‘I’ that in reality doesn’t exist” (Schmidt-Leukel, 2005:40). This is a radically different way of thinking and living than the Christian worldview of the soul, permanence and eternal life.

“There is, from a Buddhist perspective great danger in believing that one is a permanent or at least enduring being. According to Buddhism, such belief is false and must be abandoned in order to reach enlightenment” (Yandell & Netland 2009:131). Christian doctrine affirms the exact opposite of the teaching of anatta.

Halverson (1996:58) rightly describes the Buddhist doctrine by saying: “When one has right understanding, for instance, he or she sees the universe as impermanent and illusory and is aware that the ‘I’ does not in reality exist.” If there is no enduring self or soul, then what meaning would consequences have in later lifetimes? Assuming that there is no personal enduring soul to either be saved or damned, would that negate any impetus to change? Devega and Guarkee (2012:85) explain that, though there is no enduring self, there is something that
still survives: “There is no personal or eternal soul. It is consciousness that is reborn, not the soul.” The personal experience of Esther Baker who served as a Buddhist nun illustrates the doctrine of anatta, or no-self. “If feelings of fear came up, I was taught to watch them come and go, not to attach to them, as was the case with all feelings whatever they were, and to contemplate the Buddha’s teaching that there was ‘no-one’ having the feelings anyway” (Baker. 2009:43). Theravada Monks and nuns are systematically deprived of sleep, food and are instructed to not attach to any feelings. Baker’s testimony about these specific practices within Theravada Buddhism shows the beginning steps of the dehumanization, that monks and nuns undergo. It took Baker a process of many months after coming out of the Theravada Buddhist system to “re-learn” how to do many basic human things like handling money and giving and receiving hugs.

So, if there is no enduring self, then what exactly are humans said to be? A common way in which Theravada Buddhism views personhood and concepts is: “A whole or complex – a person or a chariot – is nothing more than the parts that constitute it. Just as there is no chariot beyond the constituent physical parts associated with what we call a ‘chariot’ so too there is no soul or mind or person beyond the constituent parts associated with the idea of a person” (Yandell & Netland 2009:123). The point here is reductionism; there is no unifying, enduring entity, only parts that make up any specific thing. According to Theravada Buddhists all human beings that purport to exist reduce to five aggregates (Valea, 2008:91):

1. The body, also called material form (rupa)
2. Feeling (vedana) the sensations that arise from the six sense organs
3. Cognition (sanna) the process of classifying and labelling sensory objects, that which enables us to recognize them
4. Mental construction (samkhara) the states which initiate action and give shape to our character
5. Consciousness (vinnana) the sense of awareness of a sensory or mental object, the aggregate that generates the illusion of self
Is it really the case that there are no enduring essences and that personhood is merely an illusion for the weak minded? The next section will contrast the beliefs of *anatta* with the biblical doctrines of selfhood.

### 2.9.1 The biblical response to the Theravada doctrine of *anatta*

A biblical argument that opposes the idea of *anatta* comes from the creation of mankind. God breathed life into him, and he became a living soul or being: “Then the Lord God formed a man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being” (Genesis 2:7). Something special and significant took place with the creation of mankind. God created man in His divine image in a way that distinguishes mankind from all the rest of God’s creation. Genesis 1:27 confirms this special nature and position of mankind: “So God created mankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.” Not only does humankind bear the image of God, but later in Scripture, in fact, we learn that humans endure forever, either with God or separated from Him. One such place is in Matthew 25:46: “Then they will go away to eternal punishment, but the righteous to eternal life.” Romans 6:23 confirms this doctrine: “For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.” There are two states that man can live on in, in a glorious connection to the Saviour or in opposition to the Saviour, apart from him.

Mankind, is not merely a collection of 5 aggregates that happened to join together to temporarily create a living being; there is an unmistakable uniqueness in our superior ability to feel, to reason and to love that is not found in the rest of all of God’s creation. “At the beginning, the image of God was manifested by light of intellect, rectitude of heart and the soundness of every part” (Calvin, 1972:164). Calvin summed up this doctrine eloquently by recording that all the ways in which mankind is higher than that of the animal kingdom are all the different facets of the divine image of God in mankind. This includes authority, creativity, concept of
morality, love, dominion and freedom of will. All of these facets combined make up how mankind reflects God and His nature.

Walter Martin (2003:303) summates the two differing opinions: “The aim of Jesus is faith and individual existence in heaven in the presence of God; the Summum Bonum of Buddha is knowledge and the annihilation of self in nirvana.” But then in the same breath the Buddha affirms that there wasn’t a self to be annihilated: “As Buddha reasoned, there never existed any person to be annihilated in the first place” (Halverson, 1996:59). What can be asked and addressed in this respect by immanent critique are summarized as follows:

❖ If there is no self, then who was the Buddha?
❖ What keeps the 5 aggregates together at all?
❖ Why don’t aggregates dissolve and or join at random intervals?
❖ Why are there always five aggregates that come together? Why do we not see entities with 3 aggregates, or 6 or 15?
❖ What controls when aggregates come together and when they dissolve?
❖ Why should one follow the eightfold path and take the time to improve oneself for nirvana if one does not in actual fact really exist in the first place?
❖ If there is no enduring self to begin with, and no self to enter into nirvana, who is it that enters the hot and the cold hells?
❖ If there is no enduring self, then what significance would consequences be in later lifetimes, if there is no personal enduring soul to either be saved or damned?
❖ If it is not a self that must enter but merely a karmic re-adaption of particles, not a soul, what kind of a consequence is that?
❖ What use is karma if it won’t affect me personally, or if there isn’t a ‘me’ to affect personally anyway – shouldn’t I just then live however I desire?
❖ If there is no self or soul or persons, then who is writing this paper, and who is reading it?
These probing questions would not concern a monk, who is taught not to question what nirvana is or isn’t, but it may be useful in conversing with a Lay-Buddhist who may already struggle with the complexity and contradiction in these concepts.

The Bible presents a completely different picture when it comes to personhood. “Our goal is not to ensure the extinction of our humaneness, but to rejoice in it. Of course, we recognize our fallen nature, but we know that is both understandable and salvageable. Good news!” (Lim & Spaulding, 2005: 59). The important truth here is that God made us in His image, and no matter how far we have fallen we still bear that image. Our surprising importance in God’s eyes is something beautiful to be treasured and embraced not something to be discarded.

Merely asserting a logical inconsistency (or several logical inconsistencies) will not usher the Buddhist into a saving faith and relationship with Jesus. Pointing these afore mentioned questions in an apologetic way will hopefully open a door to a dialogue, which could lead to a person question the law of karma, and if it really matches up with the reality that mankind lives in.

2.10 Works salvation vs faith-based salvation

Theravada Buddhism presents a doctrine of works-based soteriology. “Theravada Buddhism emphasizes that the human individual is responsible for his or her own liberation or enlightenment. There is no God to whom one can turn for salvation” (Yandell & Netland, 2009:30). This is a stark contrast to the Christian worldview that says that man cannot save himself or work for salvation. The Theravada Buddhist way in which one must work for one’s salvation is outlined in detail in the four noble truths and in the resulting eightfold path: “One must follow the eightfold path, a set of ideal practices to minimize desire, thereby minimising one’s suffering” (Devega & Guarkee, 2012:86). Monks in the Theravada tradition learn the
four noble truths, begin their way on the eightfold path and adhere to the ten precepts. These precepts are practical steps for a bhikkhu to become an arahat:

Monks vow to follow the ten Precepts: (1) Not to take life (the principle of *ahimsa*) (2) not to steal, (3) not to commit sexual immorality, (4) not to lie, (5) not to take intoxicating drinks, (6) not to eat in excess or after noon, (7) not to attend any entertainment, such as dancing, singing or drama, (8) not to decorate oneself or use cosmetics, (9) not to sleep in a high or wide bed, (10) not to touch any gold or silver (Corduan, 1998:225).

These are the practical steps that are expected of a monk or nun in order to work towards enlightenment. These are just the practical out-flows of the teaching of the Buddha as expressed within the Theravada monastic system.

There is a huge contrast between what Jesus taught and what the Buddha taught as to how a man can be saved or liberated. The teaching of the Buddha runs exactly contrary to Christian doctrine and to what is revealed in holy Scripture. As previously noted the Theravada Buddhist teaching holds that only monks can reach nirvana. It is true that a Buddhist layman can temporarily use the help of a god, but nirvana can only come from a lifelong commitment as a trained Buddhist monk or nun.

If a man will live by Dhamma, he will escape misery and come to Nibbana, the final release from all suffering. It is not by any kind of prayer, nor by any ceremonies, nor by any appeal to a deity or a God that a man will discover the Dhamma which will lead him to his goal. He will discover only by one way – by developing his own character (Yandell & Netland, 2009:31).

Christian doctrine teaches that one cannot earn one’s own salvation. Section 2.1.3 in this paper succinctly explains the enormous gulf of sin between mankind and God who is perfectly holy is so wide that there is nothing but a perfect sacrifice that can bridge the gap. The Buddhist ideal by contrast is to use the four noble truths and eightfold path in order to modify one’s own behaviour, thinking and inner condition in order to achieve enlightenment and eventually nirvana. “In this case the artisan is the mediator who, having access to the deep levels of the psyche, is equipped to undertake the task of remodelling himself” (Keown,
Christianity offers no such self-help hopefulness. Jesus said that He is the only way to the Father. In John 14:6, “Jesus answered, ‘I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.’”

The Buddha asked the question: “One is one’s own refuge, who else could be the refuge?” (Yandell & Netland, 2009:30). The Buddha also famously said: “Be a light unto yourselves” (Lim & Spaulding, 2005:62). “Even the Buddha’s own followers could not depend upon him, or indeed anything else for their own salvation” (Lim & Spaulding, 2005:63). The idea of a works salvation is not exclusive to Theravada Buddhism, but it does present a multi-layered challenge to those that want to see Theravada Buddhists saved. This multi-layered challenge begins with a completely different culture, an entirely different mind-set, and a way of life that demands works in order to achieve a slightly better rebirth. The culture, the family systems, and the Buddhist clergy all reinforce this toxic belief.

By stark contrast the Bible’s position on salvation and works is clear in Ephesians 2:8-10: "For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God— not by works, so that no one can boast. For we are God’s handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.” The work of salvation is a gift of God, and no man can earn it. There is a correct place for works, which God has planned and prepared for believers to do as a response to Him, as an act of worship. There are very specific things that God calls all believers to do, and even specific things that He calls individual believers to do. In fact, the Christian is to continue to do good works, as Titus 3:8 states: “This is a trustworthy saying. And I want you to stress these things, so that those who have trusted in God may be careful to devote themselves to doing what is good. These things are excellent and profitable for everyone.”
By contrast the Buddhist adherent does works to earn karmic credit for himself. “So, it was not the other person’s benefit that was the motivation for making merit, but pure self-centeredness” (Lim & Spaulding, 2005:62). In certain places in Thailand the ideal of making merit is such a highly cherished ideal that it dramatically impacts the welfare of the poor and those from rural settings. An eye witness account from Thailand reports: “One VSO volunteer who came to visit at that time told me that 80% of the children in the area were malnourished. Yet many of the families would give their best food to us (monks) each day, as they believed that by doing so they were ‘making merit’ (good karma) and would get a better birth in the next life” (Baker, 2009:41). These rural families were providing food, support and health to the system of Wats (monks and nuns) but neglecting their own children. The biblical doctrine that addresses taking care of the family unit comes from 1 Timothy 5:8: “Anyone who does not provide for their relatives, and especially for their own household, has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever.” The Bible explicitly mandates that believers take care of the physical needs of their own households.

2.10.1 Theravada practice of Pattidana

The term used in Buddhism for the transfer of merit is Pattidana. “Sri Dhammananda, a Theravadan himself, explains that this concept of merit transfer is based on the popular belief that when a person dies, that persons ‘merits and demerits are weighed against one another’ and thus destiny is thereby determined, whether for happiness or woe” (Lim & Spaulding, 2009:106). The system of Pattidana allows one to transfer one’s own merit to others, whether they are still living or dead. “It is a very common practice to give merit, or to bestow merit to a relative right before they pass away” (Lim & Spaulding, 2009:104). According to Buddhist thought, the transfer of merit is in itself, a good deed and thus the giver receives merit for transferring merit to another. The curious thing here, as referenced in section 2.1.2, is that merit can only go from one human being to another. Merit and or karma cannot be transferred to
animals, or lower beings at all. As previously mentioned, this creates the problem of a downward spiral that creates an impossible situation to be liberated from.

For example, let us suppose that a man decides to be a robber and accrues a large debt of negative karma. That karma is passed on to the unfortunate being (or khandas) that inherits it. But suppose that being that inherits the bad karma is a malaria mosquito, and then is directly responsible for thousands of peoples suffering and dying. Consequently, the mosquito accrues more negative karma, and upon termination, the karma and future entity (khandas) can only go lower, not upward. How can any being come out of that downward spiral? That spiral would inevitably land the khandas in a hot or cold hell, and how could the being be able to accrue good karma in hell? Once one’s karma has landed the future khandas in hell, there is no one who can transfer merit to that being, so how can one escape? Is it then not just a one-way journey for those that accrue too much negative karma? To further the spiritual and logical difficulty, within the Theravada context, the Theravada teachings do not allow for a bodhisattva to be able to step in and transfer merit to one in need.

2.10.2 Christian response to the doctrine of Pattidana

The Christian response to Pattidana is that there is a transfer of merit of a different kind. The Christian response is that God sent his own Son – Jesus - to take away the sin of the world, and to transfer the righteousness of Christ to all those that will receive Him. For all those that are willing, the great exchange takes place in that the sins of those that accept Jesus as Lord and Saviour are transferred to Christ, and they are atoned for with His perfect sacrifice on the cross. When this new life-giving relationship is established, and the sins of the believer are wiped out, the merit (righteous deeds) of Christ are credited to the believer’s spiritual account. Two biblical passages confirm this wonderful transfer of Christ’s righteousness for us. In Philippians 3:8-9, Paul explains, “What is more, I consider everything a loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I
consider them garbage, that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ—the righteousness that comes from God on the basis of faith.” According to Romans 4:5-7, “However, to the one who does not work but trusts God who justifies the ungodly, their faith is credited as righteousness. David says the same thing when he speaks of the blessedness of the one to whom God credits righteousness apart from works: ‘Blessed are those whose transgressions are forgiven, whose sins are covered.’” Christ is the refuge, who performed the perfect work to save mankind that had fallen so far from Him that mankind could never earn their salvation.

The concept of Pattidana, although not a direct correlation to the idea of Christian salvation and God’s perfect grace is in fact a worldview-opening conversation. This idea can start a salvation conversation in a way that a Buddhist may understand what God did by sending Jesus to take his place.

2.11 Meditation and ultimate perfection vs progressive sanctification and ultimate perfection

To the Theravada monk, meditation is one of the essential ways in which the mind can be brought under the control of the meditator. It is the meditator who improves himself and comes to the right understanding that will lead to the right action and eventually enlightenment. “Meditation is the principle Buddhist strategy for making oneself what one wishes to be” (Keown, 1996:84). The end goal of meditation and the Buddhist principles is detachment from the world, in order to achieve enlightenment and eventual nirvana. “Perfection and entry into nirvana required that a person go forth from the homeless life into the status of a recluse and follow the established discipline until he attained the perfection of the Arhat” (Berry, 1967:61).

What effect would this complete detachment have on the spouse of the one who is meditating? “For Buddhist meditation, which was developed by and for renunciates, cultivates
feelings of detachment from the world. People who use it while still involved in family life and economic activity therefore will find themselves torn; making money will appear as greed, making love to one’s spouse as ‘passion.’ It seems that lay meditators, followers of the Angarika, do tend to celibacy, which may be distressing for their spouses” (Gombrich, 1988:207). Would the consequence of this doctrine also mean that all married people are unable to reach nirvana in this life?

The Theravada Buddhist believes that perfection is possible in this life if one undergoes discipline, and follows the Eightfold path of the Buddha. Buddha is believed to have left his wife and child, to search out enlightenment – was this truly the right ethical action? If reaching nirvana means abandoning family to do so, is it spiritually constructive or spiritually destructive? And on what basis can this be determined?

“Many monks have desired to do this, so that all attachments to this world are totally severed. It is measured by Buddhist monks that the highest achievement is to get to such a state of not wanting anything that one no longer desires food and has to be spoon fed in order to be kept alive” (Lim & Spaulding, 2005:65). Is this really the highest ideal in this life is to become so severely detached that one does not even care for the most basic of one’s own bodily needs?

What can be asked by immanent critique are summarized as follows:

❖ Is it spiritually profitable to abandon one’s family in pursuit of nirvana?
  o Can letting one’s family go really be considered acting out of love and compassion - that second essential doctrine from the Eightfold path?
❖ Furthermore, what effect would this complete detachment have on the spouse of the one who is meditating?
  o How can love and detachment be possible at the same time? If one loves and has compassion on one’s spouse, how can one also detach from them?
❖ If it is possible to be perfected in this lifetime, then why aren’t there examples in our times of monks and nuns that have reached absolute perfection?
Is this really the highest ideal in this life is to become so severely detached that one does not even care for the most basic of one’s own bodily needs?

2.11.1 The biblical response to the Theravada doctrine of meditation and sinless perfectionism.

In response to the Buddhist doctrine of meditation—to perfect oneself—biblical doctrine teaches the opposite. In Isaiah 29:16, God says: “You turn things upside down, as if the potter were thought to be like the clay! Shall what is formed say to the one who formed it, ‘You did not make me’? Can the pot say to the potter, ‘You know nothing’?” Can the creation be the one to mould oneself? From the Christian worldview there is a Creator, and so the Creator has unilateral right over the clay, to form and to mould, and to make a finished piece of work. The Buddhist ideal, denies that there is in fact a Creator who has any control over the clay, and that the clay has the right to mould itself as it wishes. The apologetic question here is where did the ‘clay’ even come from? The person who is meditating, the consciousness that is trying to elevate and reach nirvana, where did the khandas even come from? Apologetically this question can be used to provoke some discussion on the origin of mankind, with the hopes in revealing to the meditator that there is actually a mind and a person that they bear the image of God, and in that there is great worth.

The Christian doctrine of progressive sanctification is the daily task of becoming more like the Son of God, Jesus Christ who is the perfect representation of God on Earth. According to Hebrews 1:3, “The Son is the radiance of God’s glory and the exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by his powerful word. After he had provided purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty in heaven.” The task of sanctification is enormous and cannot be accomplished by human effort. It can only be the work of God. The church in Galatia believed falsely that they could sanctify themselves. Paul wrote in Galatians 3:1-3, “You foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you? Before your very eyes Jesus Christ was
clearly portrayed as crucified. I would like to learn just one thing from you: Did you receive the Spirit by the works of the law, or by believing what you heard? Are you so foolish? After beginning by means of the Spirit, are you now trying to finish by means of the flesh?” (italics mine). Sanctification is not a work of the flesh nor by adherence to a strict moral code, but is done by the power of the Holy Spirit. Paul in 2 Thessalonians 2:13 encourages: “But we ought always to thank God for you, brothers and sisters loved by the Lord, because God chose you as first fruits to be saved through the sanctifying work of the Spirit and through belief in the truth.” The work of salvation and the work of sanctification are the work of the Spirit of God, not accomplished by the work of the flesh or the adherence to the law.

The Christian’s responsibility is to be walking in the Spirit, understanding the will of God and constantly allowing the work of the Holy Spirit in the Christian’s own life. This can be accomplished in many different ways, chiefly through studying the Word of God and by Christian meditation: “Christian meditation, very simply, is the ability to hear God’s voice and obey his word. It is that simple. I wish that I could make it more complicated for those who like things difficulty. It involves no hidden mysteries, no secret mantras, no mental gymnastics, no esoteric flights into the cosmic consciousness” (Foster, 1998:17).

The biblical idea of meditation can be found in Gen 24:63, Josh 1:8, Ps 1:2, Ps 63:6, Ps 77:12, and Ps 119:97. The ideas here are to fill oneself up with God, his Word and his ordinances and to be changed more into God’s likeness.

There is a complete difference between Buddhist meditation that is supposed to empty oneself and Christian meditation that is done in order to fill oneself to the fullest with the Lord and His presence. “In reality the two ideas stand worlds apart. Eastern meditation is an attempt to empty the mind; Christian meditation is an attempt to fill the mind. The two ideas are quite different. Eastern forms of meditation stress the need to become detached from the world.
There is an emphasis on losing personhood and merging with the cosmic mind, there is a longing to be free from the burdens and pains of this life and be released into the impersonality of nirvana” (Foster, 1998:21).

The Christian picture of what sanctification looks like while it is in progress is a life of self-sacrifice for others out of love and compassion. Christ’s picture and ideal is the Christian laying down his life and his rights for his friends. Jesus said in John 15:13, “Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one’s life for one’s friends.” That does not mean abandoning others for self-enlightenment but seeking the good of others even at great personal cost.

It is vitally important that the Christian apologist address the reasons why perfection in this life is not a possibility, citing some of the current events of many famous monks who have strived for perfection all their lives and have failed to reach that perfection. This idea must be addressed in the Theravada Buddhist worldview, and from a caring, compassionate perspective, not a judgmental or hyper-critical one.

2.12 Self-reliance vs reliance on God

The primary teaching and praxis of Theravada Buddhism hinges on self-reliance and discipline. This can be seen in the doctrine of karma (section 2.1), and in the Buddhist practice of meditation (section 2.11). “It is up to the individual to grasp the truth, to appropriate it, and thereby to attain nirvana” (Yandell & Netland, 2009:30). The idea of self-reliance is a complete opposite to the Christian doctrine of reliance on God. “We (Buddhism) must follow the middle path and accrue karmic merit whereas Christianity clearly states that we must repent of our sins and trust the saving work of Jesus Christ” (Halverson, 1996:61). Both Theravada Buddhism and Christianity believe that they are in fact promoting the middle way. The middle way that the Buddha was proposing was steering away from sensual indulgence and self-mortification. “Without veering toward either of these extremes, the Tathagata has awakened to the middle
way, which gives rise to vision, which gives rise to knowledge, and leads to peace, to direct knowledge, to enlightenment, to Nibbana” (Bodhi, 2005:75).

Historically and in modern Theravada praxis, the idea of self-reliance is a prominent theme. “The Buddha taught, encouraged and stimulated each person to develop himself and work out his own emancipation, for man has the power to liberate himself from all bondage through his own personal; effort and intelligence” (Yandell & Netland, 2009:31).

Meditation is seen as one of the central disciplines by which a monk or a nun can reach enlightenment, but also by a strict adherence to the teachings of the elders. “The eightfold path is thus a path of self-transformation: an intellectual, emotional, and moral restructuring in which a person is reoriented from selfish, limited objectives towards a horizon of possibilities and opportunities for fulfilment” (Keown, 2000:56). The next sub-section will cover why biblical doctrine presents the reality that self-perfection is not attainable or even possible.

2.12.1 The biblical response to the Buddhist doctrine of self-reliance

According to Christian doctrine, reliance on God is what brings eternal salvation and sanctification, not reliance on oneself. From a Christian worldview, self-reliance is not only untrue but not even possible. To illustrate the biblical stance about the impossibility of self-perfectionism, the wisest human being to have ever lived in the Old Testament, according to biblical narrative, was King Solomon of Israel. Solomon was granted heavenly wisdom as a grace that came directly from God.

God gave Solomon wisdom and very great insight, and a breadth of understanding as measureless as the sand on the seashore. Solomon’s wisdom was greater than the wisdom of all the people of the East, and greater than all the wisdom of Egypt. He was wiser than anyone else, including Ethan the Ezrahite—wiser than Heman, Kalkol and Darda, the sons of Mahol. And his fame spread to all the surrounding nations (I Kings 4:29-31).
Although Solomon outshined all others regarding wisdom he could still be ensnared by and destroyed by sin. That was in fact the actual outcome of Solomon’s life and reign as king over Israel. The Bible tells us that Solomon tried every pleasure, built every structure his heart desired, was wealthy beyond imagining, and had well over 1000 wives/concubines.

King Solomon, however, loved many foreign women besides Pharaoh’s daughter—Moabites, Ammonites, Edomites, Sidonians and Hittites. They were from nations about which the Lord had told the Israelites, “You must not intermarry with them, because they will surely turn your hearts after their gods.” Nevertheless, Solomon held fast to them in love. He had seven hundred wives of royal birth and three hundred concubines, and his wives led him astray (I Kings 11:1-3, cf. Ecclesiastes 2:9-11).

The Bible teaches that even a man like Solomon, who had great wisdom, every advantage and wealth, was still snared and destroyed by sin! If King Solomon was not able to be self-reliant, and he was gifted with heavenly wisdom, how much less can all the rest of humanity be self-reliant!

The Christian worldview centres upon a dependence upon God for salvation, sanctification and justification. The product of a thoroughly Christian worldview is choosing the middle way, denying of one’s own selfish desires, and a complete trust in God, not a renunciation of oneself using the supremacy of self and meditation.

2.13 Upaya and skilful means vs one road to heaven, Jesus

To the Theravada Buddhist, upaya is the use of a wide variety of skilful means with the end result of moving an adherent closer to enlightenment. “Buddhism also puts forward the idea of ‘skilful means’ (upaya) which claims that the Buddha taught different things to different people in accord with what they were able to understand” (Yandell & Netland, 2009:112). Theravada Buddhism also puts forth the idea that the Buddha taught according to each man’s specific ability to understand and comprehend truth. These skilful means can be contradictory, false and even unethical, but if they bring the person closer to nirvana then according to
Theravada Buddhism, not only can they be employed but they must be employed. The following is a parable that accurately illustrates the Buddhist concept upaya:

A man finds himself at the bottom of a deep well from which he cannot escape on his own. Standing at the edge of the well, the Buddha looks with compassion on the man’s plight and lowers a beautiful golden ladder down while urging him to climb to safety. Eagerly the man seizes the bottom rung of the ladder and rises rung by rung until he reaches the edge of the well where the Buddha waits. As he clasps the Buddha’s hand and is pulled to safety, he looks back down into the well, but instead of a beautiful golden ladder, he discovers that he has climbed up a rickety wooden structure that was falling apart beneath him even as he climbed. Springing from the well, he looks upon the Buddha reproachfully and says, “Everything you ever taught me was a lie.” To which the Buddha responds, “You are out of the well” (Lim & Spaulding, 2005:75).

_Upaya_ is skilful-means as a method of reaching enlightenment and can contain things that are blatantly false if those means bring the adherent closer to nirvana and enlightenment, then per Theravada Buddhism those means are not only justifiable but necessary. “_Upaya_ may employ not only teachings that are admittedly not true, but also practices generally considered immoral. As _upaya_ does not insist on truth in its ideas, perhaps neither does it require decency in its actions” (Lim, Spaulding, and De Neui, 2005:142).

_Upaya_ is not limited to one path or teaching but encompasses many different paths, methods and means. To illustrate just how diverse _upaya_ can be, to the Tantric Buddhist, ritualistic sex is not only justified but encouraged in order to reach enlightenment. “It must be noted that tantric Buddhism consciously seeks enlightenment through sensual indulgence and ritual intercourse” (Lim, Spaulding, and De Neui, 2005:142). Theravada Buddhism within Thailand will use a completely different _upaya_ to bring enlightenment to the male monks: “A very different use of the female as _upaya_ for the male is the depiction of her decomposing corpse to teach impermanence” (Lim, Spaulding, and De Neui, 2005:143). With this specific _upaya_, male monks are instructed to watch all eight stages of decomposition of a female body. The corpse of the woman rots in front of the monks and they meditate on this to understand impermanence and to create an aversion to lustful desires.
The logical and spiritual inconsistency here is that one stream of Buddhism (Tantric) uses lust and ritualistic sex as upaya and says that this will bring its adherents closer to the end goal of enlightenment, and another stream of Buddhism (Theravada) shuns all lust and has monks meditate closely as a female body decomposes to help avert them from lustful desire and attachment. Ester Baker (2009:43) who was formerly a Theravada Buddhist nun gives a personal story of what this upaya looked like at a Wat in Thailand. She lived at that Wat for over a year. “To one side of the shrine (Buddha sculpture) was a pickled baby in a jar and in a glass case nearby there was a skeleton of a village woman who had shot herself. These peculiar items had been offered to the monks by the villagers, to be used as objects of meditation – to help reflect on death and impermanence.”

The Buddhist response to the reason for contemplating death as a meditation is a simple one. “Buddhist literature frequently advises us to contemplate the certainty of death and the uncertainty of its arrival. This recommendation is not made to induce an attitude of chronic morbidity but to help us break our infatuation with life and develop detachment. For this reason, recollection of death has become one of the most important subjects of Buddhist meditation” (Bodhi, 2005:188). With detachment and nirvana as the highest ideal, it makes sense to want to contemplate both death and the uncertainty of death’s arrival. However, from the Christian worldview, contemplation of death apart from the life-giving knowledge of Christ cannot bring righteousness, only fear and or fatalism.

By immanent critique, the end result of Theravada Buddhist upaya and teaching is the final cleaving from false ideas. So how then can upaya that actively employs falsehoods lead a monk to liberation from false views, if false views are employed in bringing him closer to liberation? Would not the truth be a more useful means in drawing a person closer to liberation and attachment? Yandell and Netland (2009:108) confirm that the intent of Theravada
Buddhism is to be the final elimination of all false views: “The final key to liberation for the Buddhist lies with this analytic destruction of false views.”

An immanent critique from a famous Jain, Shankara, is this of the system of Buddhist upaya: “Shankara dismissed the Buddha by saying that ‘Buddha, by propounding the three mutually contradictory systems, teaching respectively the reality of the external world, the reality of ideas only, and the general nothingness, has himself made it clear either that he was a man given to make incoherent assertions, or else that hatred of all beings induced him to propound absurd doctrines by accepting which [people] would become thoroughly confused” (Yandell & Netland, 2009:108). The logical inconsistency of presenting three teachings that contradict each other has been noted not just by Western Christians but comes also from a Jain, who maintains an Eastern worldview and is immanently critiquing the methods, and the teaching of the Buddha. According to the opinion of Shankara, skilful means and the upaya of teaching three mutually exclusive teachings and trying to hold them all as true is nothing more than foolishness.

2.13.1 Biblical response to the doctrine of upaya

Biblical doctrine in direct contrast to the Buddhist doctrine of upaya teaches that God created both men and women, and that God created a pathway for man and woman to be united with Him through the sacrifice of Jesus. Both the eccentric and ritualistic use of sex, and the meditation on the corpse of a rotting woman are not emotionally or spiritually profitable, but rather extreme abuses of how God has made the human mind and spirit to work. These extreme practices will not bring the person any closer to God. Romans 8:1-2 says, “Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus, because through Christ Jesus the law of the Spirit who gives life has set you free from the law of sin and death.” This scripture confirms that Christ has freed the Christian not only from sin but from death itself! The upaya
of meditating about death will not set one free, but focusing on the completed work of Jesus on the cross will bring righteousness, freedom and eternal gains.

Furthermore, upaya in the Buddhist thinking is something that is successively discarded after use. Reflecting on the above illustration of the ladder, it is a one-way journey and the higher one gets to being out of the pit (enlightenment) the more the previous doctrines, practices and means can be discarded as no-longer beneficial. “For the Buddhist, religious doctrines have utility rather than truth” (De Neui & Lim, 2006:35). The Buddha himself used the illustration of a raft that was cobbled together to cross a great river, and how absurd it would be for someone to cross the river and then carry the raft on his head because it helped him cross the river. “In the same way bhikkus [monks] I have taught a doctrine similar to the raft – it is for crossing over [nirvana] and not for carrying” (Yandell & Netland, 2009:114).

De Neui and Lim (2006:35) contrast the idea the half-life of Buddhist doctrines with the Christian perspective: “With Buddhist doctrines, when their use is fully utilized, they should be discarded. This contrasts with Christian views of doctrines as unchanging and timeless truths to be held as life guides.” The skilful means and methods that Jesus taught his disciples and modelled in his time on Earth, were not unattainable ideals that the average person cannot attain. Jesus set the example and said to his followers that He would make them fishers of men. According to Matthew 4:19, “Come, follow me,” Jesus said, “and I will send you out to fish for people.” The “skilful means” of Jesus was to teach love and humility and service. At the last supper, Jesus gave the ultimate object lesson when he the teacher and honoured one, stooped down, and washed the disciple’s feet. KP Yohannan (2004:67) puts it this way “Humility is the place where all Christian service begins.”

Jesus set out specific teachings for his disciples to follow. He did not open the door to any and all means in order to get into heaven, but was very specific in how a man could be
saved, and that is only through faith in Him and through his cleansing and his righteousness.
The means and vehicle through which God has chosen to bring the message of salvation to the ends of the Earth are the very followers that God has entrusted this message to. “God’s plan A for the redemption of the World is the church, and He has no plan B” (Yohannan, 2004:57). God’s plan is to use the Church to reach the World, and to use believers as an integral part of His plan.

To show the immense contrast between Theravada upaya and Christian doctrine, the Buddha likened his teaching and skilful means to a raft that temporarily takes one from one place to another. By contrast the illustration that Jesus gave to his disciples and to the crowds at the Sermon on the Mount was like that of a rock. Jesus said that one can build his house (literally: life) on the rock, and then when the storms of life strike the house, it will not fall. The bedrock of Jesus teaching is not to be discarded after use, or for temporary transition, but for permanent building. According to Matt 7:24-29,

“Therefore, everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house on the rock. The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house; yet it did not fall, because it had its foundation on the rock. But everyone who hears these words of mine and does not put them into practice is like a foolish man who built his house on sand. The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell with a great crash.” When Jesus had finished saying these things, the crowds were amazed at his teaching, because he taught as one who had authority, and not as their teachers of the law.

Jesus concluded this authoritative teaching by saying that those that do not put his words and teaching to practice are like those that build houses on the sand and when the storms come their destruction is certain. In concluding this section, it is imperative that the Christian worker understands the difference between upaya and the skilful means by which the Lord uses to build His church and save His people.
2.14 Formative deductions about belief systems

These distinct worldview differences as outlined in sections 2.1 through 2.13 show that in all aspects that have been examined and in many more essential aspects Christianity and Buddhism are diametrically opposed to one another. De Neui and Lim (2006:43) sum up the comparison of the Buddhist worldview with this concise statement: “The orthodox Christian position, and that of the Buddhist are exact opposites on many fundamental issues. The Christian orients him- or herself towards God, the absolute Other…” The direct opposition in thinking, living and teaching creates an extreme challenge in presenting Christ to someone with a Buddhist Worldview. “Buddhism is far more complex than most Christians are willing to acknowledge, and work among Buddhist people will continue to be far more difficult and resistant than we now experience” (Lim & Spaulding, 2005:415). These specific presuppositions of Buddhism need to be understood and addressed prior to an individual receiving Christ as their saviour.

Lim and Spaulding (2005:55) express the apologetic task eloquently: “Our primary task then is to break open the worldview (belief system) that has no place for Christ and to introduce him as the one whom all people must bow the knee (Phil. 2:10).” The Buddhist worldview has no understanding of or place for Jesus and the gospel, and it is the job of the missionary, church planter and evangelist to delicately look for the cracks and weak points within the worldview of Theravada Buddhism and to insert biblical truth at the level that it can be accepted, and thereby advance the Kingdom of God.
3 Contextualization of the Gospel

Tennent (2002:324) confidently begins the conversation of contextualization by emphasizing: “The Gospel message is universal, and its transforming power is applicable to any and every culture on earth.” Tennent (2002:325) goes on to say, “The incarnation is the ultimate example of what we call the translatability of the gospel. In this context, the translatability of the gospel refers to the ability of the gospel to be articulated, received, appropriated and reproduced into a potentially infinite number of cultural contexts.” This section looks at the question as to why the gospel has not been more effectively proclaimed in Southeast Asia, in the Buddhist majority nations, if the gospel is perfectly able to be translated into an infinite number of contexts.

3.1 Defining the task of contextualization

To correctly look at the enormous task that is contextualization, one must first clarify a workable definition of the term. Lim and Spaulding (2005:182) begin to define the arduous task of contextualization: “Learning to wrap the message in such a way that makes sense to the local people is a part of the broader task known as contextualization.” Contextualization is the act of presenting and living the message of the gospel in such a way that the local people can fully understand and respond to it without cultural hindrance. Timothy Tennent (2010:86) quotes Newbigin about contextualization: “True contextualization happens when there is a community which lives faithfully by the gospel and in the same costly identification with people in their real situations as we see in the earthly ministry of Jesus.” For the gospel to succeed and for the work within the Buddhist block to be a part of the Missio Dei, the enormous task of contextualization needs to take place.
One of the best definition of contextualization comes from *One Gospel for all Nations* where Jackson Wu (Wu. 2016:4) quotes David Hesselgrave:

Christian contextualization can be thought of as an attempt to communicate the message of the person, works, Word, and will of God in a way that is faithful to God’s revelation, especially as it is put forth in the teachings of Holy Scripture, and that is meaningful to respondents in their respective cultural and existential contexts.

Contextualization is a feedback process, not a mere utterance of the Gospel. “It is not just our task to speak the word of God, but to ensure that it is understood clearly in terms of the receptor’s understanding” (Lim & Spaulding, 2005:52). This requires copious amounts of time to make sure the message is sent in a way that it can be received. It requires making sure that the message is biblically accurate and that there is a chance for feedback and a meaningful response. The most suited people to the task of contextualization are the local believers where they exist. “Contextualization is not something that flows in one direction – from the West to the rest of the world. Contextualization is a community effort” (Wu, 2016:2).

The very specific difficulties of different languages and very different cultures make for a laborious task, that through the power of the Holy Spirit, creates an authentic expression of the Scriptures, the church and church praxis. “Although it is full of complexity and nuance, contextualization involves finding practical solutions for specific problems and places” (Wu, 2016:2). Bosch warns that missionary endeavours, no matter how noble they are, must align themselves with what God is truly doing in the field. Those enterprises that are not aligning themselves with what God is already doing are not actively engaged in the Missio Dei and are not authentic mission endeavours at all. “Our missionary activities are only authentic insofar as they reflect participation in the mission of God” (Bosch, 2002:391). This caution is a stern warning for those that are engaged in any activity that is not part of what The Holy Spirit is actually doing in the people group, no matter how well-intention or noble the effort.
The first task of all truly biblical missions is to identify what the Holy Spirit is already doing and to humbly ask the Spirit of God what is the missionary’s place in God’s Missio Dei. “Believing that God is actively at work among unbelievers, Christians can approach non-Christians looking for evidence of his work” (Lim & Spaulding, 2005:18). Part of the initial process of contextualization is recognizing what the Holy Spirit is already actively doing in the lives of non-believing Buddhists and in local communities. Searching for and working with what God is already doing is the correct point of departure for contextual salvific work. To do otherwise is a waste of time, resource and energy.

3.2 Biblical justification for the method of contextualization

The challenge of contextualization is not new to the 21st century, but has been with the church since the very conception of the church. The very act of God coming to us in human flesh is the ultimate act of contextualization. John 1:14 tells us, “The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.” Hebrews 4:15 shows us that Jesus dwelt among us and was the perfect example of contextualization: “For we do not have a high priest who is unable to empathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet he did not sin.” Philippians 2:5-7 gives us the pattern of contextualization and how it ultimately requires humility: “In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus: Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage; rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness.”

Another prime example of contextualization comes from Acts 15:1 -2: “Certain people came down from Judea to Antioch and were teaching the believers: ‘Unless you are circumcised, according to the custom taught by Moses, you cannot be saved.’ This brought
Paul and Barnabas into sharp dispute and debate with them. So, Paul and Barnabas were appointed, along with some other believers, to go up to Jerusalem to see the apostles and elders about this question.” This is not the only example of believers with Jewish backgrounds insisting that Gentile believers ought to try to follow the whole law of Moses. Acts 15 illuminates the principle of contextualization in that each culture can live faithfully before God without having align with Jewish customs. “Miraculously they saw that Gentiles could live faithfully before God within the context of their own culture and that Jews could do likewise. So, the cultural captivity of the church was broken, and believers everywhere could receive one another without needing to proselytize for their own culture” (Foster, 1987:200). Even after the elders in Jerusalem settled the issue for the early church, there are still more examples of well-intentioned Jewish believers who travelled extensively to Gentile churches and preached that a Gentile must first convert to all the cultural forms of Judaism and then be converted to Christianity. This was obviously erroneous, but it took place enough that the Apostle Paul addressed it in his letters to the early churches. Even in the early first-century church it took years before the church recognized that Gentiles do not need to take on Jewish cultural and ritualistic traits to honour God, but can in a “Gentile way” authentically worship God and be partakers in the family of faith. Paul in writing to the church in Galatia, wrote of this very struggle, Galatians 2: 11 -16:

When Cephas came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face, because he stood condemned. For before certain men came from James, he used to eat with the Gentiles. But when they arrived, he began to draw back and separate himself from the Gentiles because he was afraid of those who belonged to the circumcision group. The other Jews joined him in his hypocrisy, so that by their hypocrisy even Barnabas was led astray. When I saw that they were not acting in line with the truth of the gospel, I said to Cephas in front of them all, “You are a Jew, yet you live like a Gentile and not like a Jew. How is it, then, that you force Gentiles to follow Jewish customs?

We who are Jews by birth and not sinful Gentiles know that a person is not justified by the works of the law, but by faith in Jesus Christ. So we, too, have put our faith in Christ Jesus that we may be justified by faith in Christ and not by the works of the law, because by the works of the law no one will be justified.
Paul the apostle is a prime example of a missionary who used a contextual approach as noted in 1 Corinthians 9:21-23: “To those not having the law I became like one not having the law (though I am not free from God’s law but am under Christ’s law), so as to win those not having the law. To the weak I became weak, to win the weak. I have become all things to all people so that by all possible means I might save some.” Paul did not assimilate ungodly practices but changed both forms and appearances to suit the occasion and people he was reaching out to. Paul did this as a specific missionary strategy to be sensitive to the precise needs to the culture to which he was reaching out to. He used the Old Testament and the history of the Jews to help reach the Jews and he used logic and the universality of the religious desire to reason with the Greeks. In Acts 17:22-28 we see this principle in action:

Paul then stood up in the meeting of the Areopagus and said: “People of Athens! I see that in every way you are very religious. For as I walked around and looked carefully at your objects of worship, I even found an altar with this inscription: to an unknown god. So you are ignorant of the very thing you worship—and this is what I am going to proclaim to you.

“The God who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of heaven and earth and does not live in temples built by human hands. And he is not served by human hands, as if he needed anything. Rather, he himself gives everyone life and breath and everything else. From one man he made all the nations, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and he marked out their appointed times in history and the boundaries of their lands. God did this so that they would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from any one of us. ‘For in him we live and move and have our being.’ As some of your own poets have said, ‘We are his offspring.’”

Here Paul is doing the very work of contextualization. He uses one of the very idols that he found in Athens to open the door to the gospel, and he uses one of their own familiar sayings of their own poets to further a conversation around humankind being a special creation of God. Paul uses contemporary terms, ideology and examples from Athens itself to start a salvation conversation with the men of Athens. In Athens, he uses a line of argumentation and rhetoric that they will likely understand and accept, and there are those in the crowd that did accept the gospel message. Moreover, Paul is asked back for a second opportunity to present
the gospel. Paul models an essential element in contextualization, the adapting of cultural forms and styles to suit the culture to which the gospel is presented. Paul did not compromise the nature of the message but adapted its forms and expression in order to maximize the potential.

These examples of Christ, Paul and the early church faithfully illustrate the arduous task that is contextualization. “Contextualization, if done well, keeps in perspective for us the fact that Jesus is King of every context” (Wu. 2016:14). These examples also illustrate the necessity of going to the culture with humility and faithfully transmitting of the gospel message in such a way that it can be thoroughly understood and accepted within the culture to which it is presented.

3.3 The multi-layered challenge that contextualization presents

The specific challenge of contextualization is that differing people groups have radically different underpinnings of worldview. “The Christian message is not spoken into the air but into the ears –of living people from particular mindsets and cultures. Hence that message, while not altered in its content, must be adapted in its presentation to be understandable to our hearers” (Lim & Spaulding, 2005:79). The multi-layered challenge here is not only to speak into the context of Theravada Buddhism proper, but into the very specific multi-layered subset of culture that Buddhism has assimilated and to the very people that hold so dearly to that specific system of belief. To illustrate the complexity and difficulty in giving a simple biblical message within the Thai-Buddhist context, the following is an excerpt from a missionary that had spent over 16 years living in Thailand, learning the language, living an incarnational lifestyle and teaching English to Thai peoples:

I was conducting an English lesson with a couple of Thai high school students and we were working through Luke 5 in the English text. We came to the point where I wanted to discuss the meaning of the passage and some of its implications, and since they were unable to converse easily in English, I said that we could switch into Thai. I asked the question, why did Peter fall to his knees and say that he was a sinful man? Without a
moment’s hesitation, the young man said, “Because he had killed all of those fish!” (Lim & Spaulding, 2005:181).

When a person with a Western worldview reads the same passage, he decodes a completely different message. Christians from the Western traditions would not consider it remarkable that Peter was a fisherman by trade and that he caught, killed and ate fish – but to the Buddhist worldview, killing the fish makes Peter an egregious sinner. This disparity in thinking presents an extreme challenge in contextualizing the gospel in Theravada contexts. Paul the Apostle’s words in 1 Corinthians 8:13 apply here: “Therefore, if what I eat causes my brother or sister to fall into sin, I will never eat meat again, so that I will not cause them to fall.” Within many Thai contexts, the Christian ought not to eat meat or indulge in some of the freedoms that are in Christ so as not to trip up the new believers and make it difficult for peoples of the Thai culture to come to faith. “Jesus Christ and the biblical message do not change but how we communicate the gospel effectively in such a new context requires some significant changes” (Tennent, 2010: 47). The message of the gospel cannot and must not change but the way in which it is presented needs alteration to facilitate the message in a way that the Buddhist mind can not only comprehend it but accept, believe and come to salvation through Jesus Christ.

Tennent (2010:46) addresses world trends and the impact of urban migration on contextualization of the gospel in this way: “Today’s missionaries must have a more nuanced understanding of how to communicate and proclaim the gospel in a holistic way to address the complex challenges of urban life and experience.” The advantage of more people being centrally located also means that there is a melting pot of many cultures, systems and beliefs all colliding within the city context. This means that many more people live outside of the rural constrictive context and are re-thinking and looking at belief-systems. This also means that
strategies that will work in the rural setting, and the analogies that work with rural people do not always directly translate into a modern context.

3.3.1 Understanding differences between guilt-innocence and honour-shame cultures

Yet another layer of difficulty in terms of contextualization comes in the form of differentiating between guilt-innocence cultures and honour-shame cultures. In addition to understanding the vast worldview differences between Buddhism and Christianity there is another massive cultural barrier, and that is the barrier of understanding how an Honour-Shame culture interacts. This immensely different way of working means that traditional Western (i.e. guilt-innocence) norms do not immediately translate to the honour-shame audience. “A person’s culture type significantly shapes his or her worldview, ethics and identity, even more than individual personality. And more significantly for Christian witness, cultural context influences how people experience sin (i.e. as guilt, shame or fear) and conceive salvation (i.e., innocence, honour or power)” (Georges & Baker, 2016:19). This dramatically impacts the cultural forms that need to be employed to successfully transmit the gospel in a way that it can be understood and by extension received.

There are several vivid differences that need to be understood before a successful presentation of the gospel can be given in an honour-shame culture. Another significant difference comes in the form of what impacts personal decisions within an honour-shame culture: “In shame cultures, people are more likely to choose right behaviour based on what society expects from them” (Richards & O’Brian, 2012:116). Part of the failure of the past effort of Christian missions in the Buddhist block has been on the Western over-emphasis on individual salvation. “Our Western emphasis of inviting individuals to turn to Christ creates an immense sociological barrier, for in most other cultures it is virtually impossible for individuals in any other area of their lives to make decisions unilaterally on their own” (Lim & Spaulding, 2005:47). What this means is that when presenting the gospel to an audience, asking for
individual conversion will be mostly unsuccessful. A significantly better approach would be to work towards winning entire social groups or winning entire families to Christ.

Another strong exhortation that comes from evangelising honour-shame cultures is: “We must be careful to live in such a way that brings honour, and not shame, on Christ’s name and his family” (Richards & O’Brien, 2012:132). The honour-shame culture places high esteem on various professions and on receiving public recognition, so the challenge here is that the Buddhist culture does not recognize the social place of a missionary or pastor. It is an anomalous concept to them. Complicating matters further is the emphasis of Western Christianity on humility and not on receiving public praise, and one of the central driving forces of the honour-shame culture is the very act of public praise. Learning to give and receive public honour is a critical part of successfully transmitting the gospel in eastern, honour-shame cultures.

Recognizing the sovereignty of God means understanding that God can and will use all different cultural systems to bring salvation to all people groups. “God is capable of working through all cultural systems and expectations to bring sinners to repentance” (Richards & O’Brien, 2012:127). How the missionary reads the Scriptures also needs to shift, and how the Scriptures are taught needs to be from an honour-shame matrix of understanding. Georges and Baker (2016:13) put it this way: “Christians ministering among Majority World peoples encounter this reality (honour-shame) in many ways. For this reason, we must use an honour shame missiology – a biblically rooted approach to Christian ministry among the nations that proclaims and mediates God’s honour for the shamed.”
3.3.2 Biblical Honour-shame culture can be used to help non-believers understand scriptural truths.

Honour-shame cultures once they are redeemed have an advantage when reading the Bible because their cultural articulations are in fact closer to the biblical accounts than Western guilt-shame norms. That is because they are closer “culturally” than the west is to the cultural norms and patterns of the Bible. “Someone with an East Asian worldview will more naturally see a number of concepts within the Bible that reflect the distinctives of his or her culture (e.g., honour, shame, and collective identity)” (Wu. 2016:13). Georges and Baker (2016:11-12) in the beginning of their book confirm this idea that the Asian cultures easily resonate with honour-shame themes in Scripture. “Reading the Bible in honour-shame terms came easily to them since their Central Asian culture mirrored the social world of the Bible in many ways.” This makes for a powerful tool in discipleship, once a group of Theravada Buddhists have been saved. Richards & O’Brian make the case that both the Old and New Testament are characterized by an honour-shame culture. They make a compelling case out of 2 Samuel 11 to show the infamous case of David’s infidelity with Bathsheba can best be understood through an honour-shame context. Many of the particular details of the story only make sense within an honour-shame culture. They rightly say that “God worked through the honour/shame system to bring David to repentance…Instead of whispering to his heart, a prophet shouted at his face. Either way God speaks” (Richards & O’Brian, 2012:126).

“What is needed today is not so much the contextualization of the informational content of the gospel but the careful contextualization of relationships” (De Neui & Lim, 2006:107). It is not the mere information of the gospel message that needs to find its way into the local context of southeast Asia, but the contextualization of relationships and the social engagements. Real relationships need to take precedence as one of the most important elements in contextualizing the gospel. Not only individual relationships are important, but fostering a
deep understanding of the inter-relationship of the groups of people within Theravada Buddhist communities in southeast Asia. “Social allegiance to the group are issues that must be accounted for if the gospel is going to be communicated with impact in this context” (De Neui & Lim, 2006:107). One of the many reasons that Christianity has been stilted is the lack of physical translation of the Christian Scriptures into a language that the people can readily understand. In the context of Laos, per the above-mentioned author, the translation of the scriptures was done only in the high vernacular, that is reserved for royalty and for business but is not widely understood amongst the common people. This makes the truth of the gospel inaccessible to the common people, which is the exact opposite of Koine Greek that was the common “street language” of its time.

In concluding this sub-section, De Neui and Lim (2006:46) summarize the broader difficulty by remarking on the specific Japanese and Thai contexts: “Many Japanese and Thais are attracted to Christianity but refrained of faith commitments due to family ancestral obligations, community loyalty, fear of shaming the good name of the family, and perception of Christianity as foreign and anti-national.”

3.4 Redemptive analogies as a method of contextualization

Redemptive analogies are one of the Christ-centric effective methods of contextualization. Don Richardson was the one who coined the term redemptive analogy. One of the most well-known redemptive analogies comes from Don Richardson’s work in Peace Child: “The key God gave us to the heart of the Sawi people, was the principle of the redemptive analogy – the application of local custom to spiritual truth. The principle that we discerned was that God had already provided for the evangelization of these people by means of redemptive analogies in their own culture” (Richardson, 2005:5). Finding redemptive
analyses can often catalyse the process of reaching the individual cultures and reaching even the most determined Theravada Buddhist.

In searching for a correct redemptive analogy, one must first consider what may not be an effective redemptive analogy within Theravada Buddhism. Trying to compare Jesus to a Bodhisattva would not resonate with a Theravada Buddhist, and some would promulgate that it is not an adequate analogy even within the context of Mahayana Buddhists. Ernest Valea (2008:186), in concluding his comparison between Christ and Buddha states that: “In the end, nobody actually benefited from Christ as a Bodhisattva.” His well-reasoned argument is that the teachings of Christ in the first century led the Jews of Israel in the opposite direction of where a Bodhisattva would have led them. Even if the redemptive analogy worked within Mahayana Buddhism, which it hasn’t, it would not resonate with Theravada Buddhists who do not acknowledge Bodhisattvas at all.

In his book, Peace Child, Don Richardson outlines the cultural analogy of the Irian Jaya head hunters. The tribe that Don Richardson was working with considered personal treachery to be one of the highest ideals. To illustrate the extreme level of cultural difficulty in presenting the gospel, when Don and his team presented the gospel to the Sawi people, the tribe thought that Judas was the hero of the gospel narrative. This was due to the fact that Judas was able to betray Jesus to the Pharisees. Once Richardson found the redemptive analogy of what a “peace child” is, and what it meant to the local culture, he could successfully transmit the gospel, and the whole tribe was saved.

A completely different tribe, that Richardson encountered had what they called sacred circles, that when one was being hunted, one could hide in and be protected from death, the very same idea that can be found in the Old Testament about cities of refuge (Numbers 35:25-32). This analogy was used to open that specific culture to the gospel. “Some redemptive
analogies stand out in the legends and records of the past: Olenos the sin-bearer; Balder the innocent, hounded to his death, yet destined to rule the new wold; Socrates’ Righteous man; the unknown god of the Athenians, an analogy appropriated by the apostle Paul; the Logos, appropriated by the apostle John; the sacrificial lamb of the Hebrews” (Richardson, 1976:288).

“The Lotus Sutra contains a story that provides an interesting contrast to the parable of the prodigal son in Christ’s teaching (Lk 15:11-32)” (Corduan, 1998:248). Even though the two stories are in fact very different in their conclusions, there is a way to bridge the gap and start the conversation of faith using the story within the Lotus Sutra. One big difference is that in the Lotus Sutra the father sends the son away to work to become worthy, working in a stable. In the Prodigal son, it is the son’s sinful choices that take the son away from the Father. “Thus, the father sends the son to work in a stable and has him earn his inheritance. The father disguises himself and works alongside the son, but the son must prove himself worthy” (Corduan, 1998:248). Even though there are huge theological differences, the fact that the father disguises himself and goes to the son and works alongside him is a great parallel to Christ leaving heaven, being born on Earth, and working alongside humanity in real time. Hebrews 4:14-15 says this as an encouragement in regard to the Son of God coming to Earth: “Therefore, since we have a great high priest who has ascended into heaven, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold firmly to the faith we profess. For we do not have a high priest who is unable to empathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet he did not sin.” The other part of this that is an interesting side note is that the son was sent to a stable in the Lotus Sutra, and Jesus was born in a stable in Bethlehem. The final contrasting point between the parable of the prodigal son and the Lotus Sutra is that of what the father requires. In the Lotus Sutra, the Father requires that the son works in order to be made worthy; in the story of the prodigal son, the son knows that he is not worthy, and the father lavishes salvation and gifts upon his son even though his son had acted shamefully. The parallel here is
the difference between the auto-soteriology of Theravada and the grace by faith in Christ in Christianity.

*Pattidana* as mentioned in sections 2.1.2 and 2.11 makes for a good conversation starter with Theravada Buddhists. The idea of merit transfer or *Pattidana* makes an interesting parallel to the completed work of Christ on the Cross, when Christ not only took on our sin and infirmity but transferred his righteous merits to sinners that did not deserve it. This concept of righteousness transferred is something that the Theravada Buddhist is very familiar with, however, it falls short of being a completed redemptive analogy.

The first four of the ten precepts of Theravada Buddhism resemble four of the Ten Commandments, and this may make for an effective redemptive analogy. “(1) Not to take life (the principle of *ahimsa*) (2) not to steal, (3) not to commit sexual immorality, (4) not to lie” as strikingly similar to Exodus 20:13-16 “You shall not murder. You shall not commit adultery. You shall not steal. You shall not give false testimony against your neighbour.” Although this may not lead to entire tribes of Theravada Buddhists coming to faith, it may just open the conversation of the Ten Commandments, why they are there and what they point us to – our sinful nature.

A final possible redemptive analogy comes in the form of a Buddhist prophesy of a coming ‘Enlightened One’ called Maitreya. “When Maitreya comes, the tradition claims, he will usher in a golden age of enlightenment for all” (Corduan, 1998:227). Maitreya has become a well-recognized figure in modern Buddhism: “Initially a minor figure in early Indian Buddhism, Maitreya (whose name derives from Indic MAITRI, meaning ‘lovingkindness’ or ‘benevolence’) evolved during the early centuries of the Common Era into one of the most popular figures in Buddhism across Asia.” Although this falls outside the normal purview of Theravada, it does bring up an ancient tradition that may be accepted as a possible redemptive
analogy for the millennial rule and reign of Christ. The tradition holds: “Furthermore and very importantly, the idea developed that there is another Buddha already in the last stages of preparation to come to Earth; His name is Maitreya” (Corduan, 1998:227). Christian doctrine holds that although Christ came in the flesh at his first coming, he is in fact preparing for his second coming.

None of these examples are perfect *redemptive analogies*, but after sifting carefully and being guided by the Holy Spirit, many analogies that will resonate with specific people groups can be found within that specific group’s legends, histories and oral traditions. It is the work of a skilful missionary to be open to find those rare and valuable gems and to allow God to use them to unlock that people group for His kingdom.

3.5 Which form of authentic Christianity most closely identifies with the host culture?

What needs to be seriously considered in addition to this is what form or style of Christianity will most appeal to the relevant people group and culture. This question will take on a different form depending upon what country the missionary is working in, but there are some general principles of life, spirituality and forms that the Buddhist people already accept. The clear majority of Theravada cultures accept and endorse the system of monks, nuns and laity. This cultural view of spirituality can be utilized in presenting, organizing and propagating an already existing Christian form that is familiar in style but thoroughly and faithfully Christian. This in no way means to syncretize the systems so that Christian doctrine is compromised. But for example, certain elements of a monastic, or Franciscan model of Christianity may appeal, not only to the rural laity, but also to the existing Buddhist monastic system.
Syncretism, and or assimilation of non-Christian ideology and praxis are counter-productive and spiritually stymieing. The critical first step in Christian praxis is a renunciation of old spiritual beliefs, a complete disavowal of sinful practices and a complete faith and genuine Christian praxis need to be endorsed. This genuine faith praxis can and must be authentically identifiable to the specific Buddhist group, and that can embrace all the aspects of the given culture that are not positively sinful or sinful by omission. This does not mean that Western forms and ideologies need to be implemented but that the core truths of the gospel need to be held, believed and lived out, but lived out in a way that is authentic within the people group.
4. Evangelism without Western baggage

Tennent, makes this challenge to modern missions to rethink all the strategies and methods that are currently in use: “Rather, these themes (the seven megatrends of the 21st century) call for the need to completely rethink, not only how we train and prepare missionaries, but also how we conceptualize both the global church and mission field. What we must resist is a kind of ‘business as usual’ approach to missions, which offers only a few minor adjustments or missiological window dressing while our main assumptions go unchallenged” (Tennent, 2010:50). This difficult, evaluative process is of the upmost importance in the strategic mission’s work going on in the Buddhist block.

“If we assume that Western theology is the primary or fundamental way to formulate doctrine, we inevitably force non-Western people to conform their basic categories of thinking to those found in the traditional Western culture” (Wu. 2016:10). One of the fundamental ways in which Western ethnocentrism effects missions is in how people think and operate according to their own distinct worldview. “The task of separating the ‘seed of the gospel’ from the ‘soil of Western culture’ has been painfully neglected since the emergence of Western mission enterprise” (Lim & Spaulding, 2005:49).

The first essential element of this process is to be aware of one’s own culture in such a way as to separate from even the subtlest forms of ethnocentrism. Bosch outlines the difficulty: “We should never have transplanted Christianity to Asia without breaking the pot in which the plant came, says Pieris. He calls the “inculturation-fever” a desperate last moment bid to give an Asian façade to a church which has failed to strike roots in Asian soil, because no one dares to break the Greco-Roman pot in which, for centuries, it has been existing like a stunted bonsai” (Bosch, 2002:478). Authentic faith does not require a Western worldview, neither does a church have to adhere to Greco-Roman forms in order to be biblically faithful. Among the
things that are not necessary to the gospel are the ideas of individualism, guilt-innocence, consumerism and even democracy. Another Western worldview tenet that can be discarded is that God is subservient to our understanding of logic. This is not to downplay the important role that logic has in worldview, but to dethrone it as the most important ideology.

The Greco-Roman forms that Bosch is addressing, and citing is in part the Western perspective of compartmentalization. The argument here is that the Latin church compartmentalized religion and culture in such a way as to keep the two ideals separate. Pieris, and by extension Bosch, are arguing for a more authentic expression of Christianity as expressed in unity, not distinction from culture. To further make the point, Frost and Hirsch (2007:12) say, “The missional church is messianic, not dualistic, in its spirituality. That is, it adopts the worldview of Jesus the Messiah, rather than that of the Greco-Roman empire. Instead of seeing the world as divided between the sacred (religious) and profane (nonreligious), like Christ it sees the world and God’s place in it as more holistic and integrated.”

For people with a Western worldview, the ability to let go of the Western cultural forms does not come without extraneous effort, but the fruit it reveals is that of a gospel that can be planted in any culture. Awareness of one’s own culture and the limitations thereof, is the only way to proceed away from cultural imperialism and toward an authentic, vital, sustaining and indigenous faith. “Only the Missio Dei can rescue Christianity from the Western possessiveness of it” (Tennent, 2010: 75). Georges and Baker (2016:22) make the claim that Western theology in itself is already contextualized, just contextualized to the culture of the west. “Because of its inevitable cultural constraints, Western theology does not exhaust the full meaning and application of biblical truth. Western theology itself is not ‘wrong’ but simply incomplete and limited by cultural blinders.” Corduan (1998:41) brings attention to the fact, that there is a third culture that impacts all evangelism and that is the biblical culture: “Thus
any evangelistic activity involves the interplay of three cultures: The biblical culture, the evangelist’s home culture and the receptor’s culture.” The evangelist needs to be aware of his own culture but also keenly aware of the receptor’s culture in order to avoid unnecessary difficulty in successfully transmitting the gospel.

A major example of the traditional disconnect between Western missionaries and Buddhist cultures is the importance of personal salvation. The Western worldview and Western mission enterprise focuses on personal salvation as the most important theological truth and doctrine. Theologically, salvation is the core of the missionary message, but it is not always the central concern of the people that live in the Buddhist block. “Missionaries are concerned with the importance of the forgiveness of sin in witnessing to Buddhists while both Thai Christians and Buddhists are not” (Lim, Spaulding, and De Neui, 2005:173). Maintaining family honour, and preserving the family name is so important in eastern cultures that individuals will often choose to abstain from individual decisions without consulting with the head of the family and without considering the impact that such decisions will have on the family honour. While the salvation of souls is the primary work of the missionary, understanding the primary concern of the people is equally important in the effectiveness of the missional endeavour. For the Thai peoples, salvation was not even in the top five most important reasons for religion. “For the Thai Christian students, forgiveness of sin was seventh out of ten reasons for the importance of religion” (Lim, Spaulding, and De Neui, 2005:171). Salvation is in fact one of the most important tenets taught throughout the Holy Scriptures, but that does not mean that an unreached people group will value it as much the Scriptures emphasize it. What this means is that there needs to be adjustments in how outreach is done, and corrective teachings can be done once a group of Theravada Buddhists have come to faith.

Another example of disconnect comes from the method of communication. A typical Western strategy of winning people to faith is one of the open-air preaching and direct
confrontation with the unbeliever. Often this is done with the best intentions, but what this strategy appears to be to many of the peoples of the Buddhist majority nations is pride and arrogance. “Missionaries and Thai Christians should not participate in what many call ‘hit and run’ evangelism” (Lim, Spaulding, and De Neui, 2005:181). When friction or resistance results the preacher or evangelist often will assert the gospel and propositions of truth even more firmly. This Western strategy raises tension in eastern contexts and that tension, and elevated speech can create a barrier to the gospel rather than acceptance of it. Greg Koukl (2009:30, 31) puts it this way: “Squabbling, bickering and quarrelling are not very attractive, and they rarely produce anything good. With these types of caustic disputes, I have one general rule: If anyone gets angry you lose…People who get angry get defensive, and defensive people are not in a very good position to think about whether or not your ideas are good ones.” Koukl’s general rule applies in eastern contexts even more than Western ones, because in cultures where maintaining family honour is one of the highest principles, a confrontational strategy does more long-term harm than short-term good. The truth still needs to be proclaimed, but the methodology employed is essential to the success of the entire enterprise.

A public confrontation, even a well-intentioned one in an honour-shame culture means that honour is at stake. Publicly challenging the person’s thinking, or behaviour puts their honour on the line. Furthermore, it disinclines a people to the Gospel message and to its future messengers. To illustrate the difficulty with a public confrontation model within an honour-shame culture:

Jesus entered the temple courts, and, while he was teaching, the chief priests and the elders of the people came to him. (Matt 21:23) The questions are posed in the most important public place in all of Israel. There couldn’t be any higher stakes in the honour game. The second point Matthew makes is at the end of the conflict story: No one could say a word in reply, and from that day on no one dared ask him any more questions (Matt 22:46) Jesus won. The leaders decide to kill Jesus. Honour is at stake here (Richards & O’Brian, 2012:130).
The point is not instantly clear to a Western, guilt-shame culture as to what is so critical here. However, to an honour-shame culture, a public challenge that is lost is a huge shame to the chief priests and elders. The chief priests’ response to losing honour in this exchange is retaliation. The elders and chief priests set up a way not only to have Jesus killed but to have him publicly shamed, and that is why they pushed the Roman authorities to have Jesus crucified. They selected crucifixion as the method to remove Jesus because of the amount of public shame that crucifixion presented. The chief priests had tried every possible method of disgracing, dishonouring and making Jesus of no repute, and at every turn Jesus evaded their traps, answered their unanswerable questions and continued to gain public honour. Richards & O’Brian (2012:130) finish the thought by saying “They need to publicly disgrace Jesus in order to get their honour back.” It was absolutely correct for Jesus to publicly confront the chief priests as He did because Christ’s authority is unsurpassable. Christ, knowing even the hearts of men, knew exactly what each man would need to bring about the best result; that does not mean that Western missionaries automatically know what is best within a foreign culture. In regard to Christ’s crucifixion, this was his ultimate strategy to win back the lost, something that never entered the minds of the chief priests. However, we would do well to consider what Jesus’ interactions with the religious leaders illustrates with regard to honour-shame cultures: public confrontation in such cultures is likely to provoke hostility. However, for missionaries, this means that a public confrontation or ideological-conflict is not only going to yield little or no fruit, but may actually damage the reputation of Christians, and future missionary endeavours.

An essential step in shifting away from ethnocentrism and shifting towards authentic contextualized mission from a Western missionary perspective is the shift from assuming the role as teacher to becoming the cultural learner. “We must not come as teachers but learners and must be prepared to come alongside our Buddhist friends and take their questions seriously.
so that we can better share the story of Jesus” (Lim & Spaulding, 2005:41). By honouring the culture of the people, the missionary can with time win the respect of the teacher and open the door for the gospel witness.

Another attitude that can be an unnecessary Western stumbling block comes in the form of the aggressive perception of proselytizing. In an essay written by an academic Buddhist the author recounts this perspective quite clearly. “But Buddhists also think that personal affinities and differing karma among individuals can be left to do their work without any need for aggressive, intensive proselytizing efforts on behalf of exclusive truth claims” (Muck et al, 2014:114). The manner and perception that are transmitted by missionaries and church planters is essential to the success of the mission endeavour. When efforts appear to be aggressive or combative (even if they are not intended to be aggressive), they may not take root as they ought to. Where this Buddhist author would deny Christian exclusive truth claims in favour of Buddhist truth claims, the Christian believes doctrinally the truth of John 14:6: “Jesus answered, “I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.” This is the most exclusive and final statement of faith and authority, and this faith was proven and witnessed when Jesus rose from the dead. Where the Buddhist would say that proselytization is not necessary, the Christian must respond lovingly as Christ did and present the gospel, because the Missio Dei requires that the Church reach the world.

Thankfully, sometimes a story or an analogy will resonate with the culture. A very successful culturally relevant analogy that has been used in the country of Thailand is the following:

In trying to establish the importance of who Christ really is, the writer often uses the illustration taken from tribal culture where visitors to a village would be welcomed and hosted in the house of the headman for at least three days. On approaching a village, the visitor saw two people at the entrance of the village – a young teenager and the headman. The visitor, ignorant of (misunderstanding) the appropriate cultural protocol, went up to the teenager and asked permission to stay in the village. Astounding!
Impossible! What a loss of face for the headman! Who would possibly do such a thing? The visitor would then point out that demons which the locals worship, have no real authority. They should be compared to the teenager at the entrance of the village, but Christ, who has all authority, should be compared to the headman. What sort of horrendous mistake was it for the visitor to ask permission from the teenager, and what sort of terrible sort of thing to not recognize who the headman (Christ) is? (Lim & Spaulding, 2005:55).

This analogy illustrates the distinctiveness of an honour-shame culture, and it vividly portrays the honour and authority of the Son of God to someone that operates within the honour-shame context. Jesus is the headman who has all authority and all honour and the teenager who is one that is of no repute, which represents the demons that people worship and revere. KP Yohannan (2004:156) summarizes the solution effectively:

This is what I have been trying to say to missionaries from abroad. You have been offering the water of life to the people of India in a foreign cup, and we have been slow to receive it. If you will offer it in our own cup – in an indigenous form – then we are much more likely to accept it.

As previously stated the Western, modernized type of evangelism and “cultural forms” are not only a stumbling block to the gospel in eastern Buddhist cultures, but can even prevent conversion by misconception. There must be a thoroughly Asian expression of Christianity, and culturally sensitive evangelistic methods if the Church and gospel are to succeed at her mission in the East.

4.1 Historical difficulties and failures

As the famous quote from Edmund Burke warns us: “Those who don't know history are doomed to repeat it.” The Christian practitioner needs to be aware of the principles and examples from the past that have not worked in the Buddhist block, to avoid not only those pitfalls but to put together a formidable, workable plan to see the gospel circulated in the Buddhist majority countries. “Knowing that a Buddhist is from Sri Lanka, Myanmar or
Thailand can be helpful because these countries are dominated by Theravada Buddhism” (Corduan, 1998:245). “It would be true to say that some are martyred, and great numbers persecuted, not because of their acceptance of Christ, but because the community at large wrongly thinks that the new believers are rejecting their own culture and customs” (Lim & Spaulding, 2005:47). Aiming at winning the entire group and using a contextual approach to the gospel will hopefully undo some of the damage done in the past.

“Like Catholic missions, Protestant missions as a matter of course exported their dominant clergy pattern to the mission fields, imposing it on others as the only legitimate and appropriate model, clothing David in Saul’s armour, and making it impossible for the young church either to execute its particular ministry or to survive without help from the outside” (Bosch, 2002:470). This warning from Bosch notates a trend in missions to take a Western model of leadership and insist not only that it is right, but that it is the only faithful way to run a new church. This would be the exact opposite of contextualization. Bosch’s example of David wearing Saul’s armour is a perfect example of the past failings of the planting of churches in eastern contexts.

Here is a brief look at two of those nations that are dominantly Theravada Buddhist.

### 4.1.1 Sri Lanka

Part of what complicates the history of evangelism and outreach in Sri Lanka comes from the three separate nations that have occupied Sri Lanka. “There were three separate occupying forces that ruled over Sri Lanka in its history: the Portuguese, the Dutch and eventually the British. The change of colonial power from the Portuguese to the Dutch was during the period between 1642 to 1658, and later from the Dutch to the British in 1796” (De Neui and Lim, 2006:192). This must be considered when doing a brief historical overview of the Christian movements with Sri Lanka.
Missionaries in Sri Lanka in the 1800’s used three tactics to reach the local populations: “The missionaries propagated Christianity in three main ways: by education, preaching and pamphleteering” (Gombrinch, 1988:177). Pamphleteering is the ancient practice of what are referred to as “tracts” in modern evangelism. All three of these strategies are good, and yet Sri Lanka was not sufficiently reached. There were several very interesting outflows of the efforts of Christian evangelism, one of which was Theravada Buddhism morphing its approach to evangelism and outreach. “The ‘Protestant Buddhism’ which raised its head in the second half of the nineteenth century has acquired Christian social and cultural aspects to modernize Buddhism in order to compete with the aggressive Christian missionary activities” (De Neui and Lim, 2006:179).

One difficulty in Sri Lanka goes back generations to when Christian missionaries first started working on the island. The missionaries aligned themselves with the occupying powers of the day, and tried to use coercion to convert the local peoples, which created enmity between them and the Buddhist monks. “Divine revelation forbids the use of political or physical coercion in promoting Christianity, but it demands that Christians love the world selflessly and sacrificially. This love expresses itself in an empathetic understanding of other people, humanitarian projects and a consistent witness to God’s redemptive plan” (Corduan, 1998:16). Corduan’s point is that it is improper, unethical and eventually counter-productive to use political power to try and coerce a population into Christian belief. The Buddhist population on Sri Lanka became even more resistant to Christian attempts to promote the gospel. After unsuccessfully trying to use political persuasion, the missionaries looked to the Buddhist scriptures and employed an aggressive debating tactic to try and show that the Buddha was nothing more than an empty deluded mendicant. Muck, Netland and Mcdermott, (2014:105) present this stern warning: “The general principle emerges. Be careful what mission method you choose, because it is likely that the same method will be adopted by the religion on the
receiving end of it—and will be used in their approaches to you. And if there are excesses, you will eventually be subject to the same excesses.” The more that the early Sri Lankan missionaries attacked the person of the Buddha, the more that the Buddhist monks looked to the Bible and tried to prove that Yahweh was nothing more than a demon that wants blood sacrifice. The debate, in the eyes of the ancient people of Sri Lanka went in favour of the Buddha and the gospel was slandered and brought low. Even to this day many of the people of Sri Lanka do not trust missionaries or understand the gospel.

Sri Lanka shows us a pattern of what not to do when working in the Buddhist majority nations. Underhanded tactics, political coercion and using ungodly methods will only make the gospel unattractive in Theravada nations.

4.1.2 Thailand

A missionary that worked in the Buddhist block over a hundred years ago, in the country that is now Thailand had this comment to make about the level of difficulty in effectively evangelising Buddhists: “I believe there is no country more open to unrestrained mission work than Siam (modern Thailand), but I believe that there can hardly be a country in which it is harder to make an impression” (Lim & Spaulding, 2005:180). In trying to understand how the specific Thai peoples are oriented, De Neui & Lim (2006:8) made this remark: “Thai are first and foremost ego-oriented. They are characterized by the highest ego value. Thai people use the Thai way of meekness to avoid confrontation in order to maintain smooth relationships and to protect their identity.” Part of that identity is being Buddhist. A common sentiment, gathered from a short-term mission trip to Bangkok, from an average Thai person is: “To be Thai is to be Buddhist.” Thai peoples identify nationally and almost unequivocally as Buddhists.
Thai people also have a very different view of what religion is and what it ought to do for people. In looking at what the Thai people expect from a religion and what it ought to do, Lim and De Neui (2006:8) discovered several interesting shifts from the traditional understanding of religion:

An important theory about the ways the Thai learn religion: (1) religion is affective; (2) religion is applicable to the present felt needs; (3) religion is practical, solving life’s problems; (4) religion emphasizes rituals, ceremonies, and festival; (5) religion has integrative functions; (6) religion is concretely experiential; (7) religion is bonding; (8) religion does not force faith.

From this we can correctly guess what has not been effective in Thailand. When Western missionaries present Christ in a purely soteriological way, and the local people expect religion to be very practical, affective and ritualistic – a disconnect occurs. Thais are looking for religion to impact daily needs and problems, not only eternal ones. Thais look for religion to be bonding and not forceful, and modern Westernized evangelistic techniques that focus on high pressure salesman techniques and immediate individual decisions will not be effective but damaging!

Although the church has been planted in many parts of Thailand, the clear majority of the population of Thailand remains completely unaffected by the Christian message and presence.
5 Winning strategies

This section of the dissertation addresses the two most important facets of contextualization in order to effectively reach Theravada Buddhist nations and people groups. The sections are: what has worked in the past and a new approach and methodology.

5.1 What has worked in the past

Although there has been some successful church-planting in Theravada countries and areas, however, church growth seems to have been severely stunted. At the writing of this study, 1.3 percent of Thailand would identify themselves as Christians. Even though there has been extensive work, evangelism, effort and resource poured into the areas of Thailand, there seems to be very little fruit from those endeavours. This rate of success is similarly mirrored in all the Buddhist majority nations, with the sole exception of South Korea. There is no single strategy, question or apologetic that was worked unilaterally in the past. However, there are several cases of Buddhists who have come to Christ, and these cases must be carefully studied, examined and the findings utilized for future success.

5.1.1 Wrestling with existential questions that are not answered in Buddhism

“Williams, who was Buddhist for twenty years, was challenged by Thomas Aquinas’s writings in seeking after a single troubling question: ‘Why is there something rather than nothing?” (Lim & Spaulding, 2005:17). It was the searching for the answer to this simple question that brought Williams to faith in Christ. This startling Christian awakening in a firm Buddhist warrants a closer look at the question of life’s origins and how to use this question strategically with Theravada Buddhists.

A typical Buddhist response often comes from the teaching of their founder Gautama, who when questioned about the nature of things and of the nature of nirvana, exhorted monks to not strive after such questions but to focus their efforts exclusively on reaching nirvana.
Gautama would argue the futility of asking such questions using an illustration of when one is injured by an arrow, should one focus on who shot the arrow, which clan the shooter is from or on dealing with the problem of the injury of the arrow. Culamalunkya Sutra (MN 63) says this:

Suppose Malunkyaputta, a man wounded by an arrow thickly smeared by poison, and his friends and companions, his kinsmen and relatives, brought a surgeon to treat him. The man would say “I will not let the surgeon pull out the arrow until I know whether the man who wounded me was a khattiya, a Brahmin, a merchant, or a worker. “And he would say ”I will not let the surgeon pull out the arrow until I know the name of the clan of the man who wounded me…” (Bodhi, 2005:231).

However, this answer does not begin to answer the question or satisfy the natural curiosity of humanity, and can be pressed to affect questioning and knowledgeable Buddhists. The Buddha, according to tradition, had become perfectly enlightened, and so it would not have been difficult for him to answer such a simple question, and yet he not only refrained but refused to answer such questions. His refusal could be the starting point for an open conversation as to the nature of where life began and what could have possibly created and sustained it for so many years.

5.1.2 Openness in times of difficulty

A study by Phillip Hughes in 1989 found that those who had converted from Buddhism had experienced one very specific truth that impacted them: “They learned that they can depend on God in times of trouble” (Lim, Spaulding, and De Neui, 2005:170). This fact illustrates the reality that personal difficulties and even disasters can open the door to the gospel in a very special and critical way. Historically Christianity has attracted those Buddhists that have been in deep trouble and have been looking for a way out that is not offered within Buddhism. “Christianity attracts people in trouble for it tells them that they can turn to God and depend on God’s help” (Lim, Spaulding, and De Neui, 2005:173).
The biblical truth that can be utilized within these very difficult contexts is Hebrews 4:16: “Let us then approach God’s throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need.” God is available to help those that are in need physically, emotionally and most importantly spiritually.

5.1.3 Close contact and care from Christians

One very powerful observation that came from a former Buddhist from China was this strategic key to effective witness: “Most people come to Christ because of someone who consistently and genuinely cared. In my case, it was my biology teacher, a Chinese gentleman who patiently nurtured me from unbelief to belief” (De Neui & Lim, 2006:43). This believer also shared the fact that she gradually became aware of her inability to reach nirvana with her own merit-making: “Gradually, I experienced a crisis of faith when I became aware that I can never earn enough points to achieve nirvana” (De Neui & Lim, 2006:42). It was the constant and gentle care of this teacher that opened the door for this Chinese Buddhist to believe in the Saviour.

5.1.4 The witness of Christian marriage

In ancient Ceylon (modern Sri Lanka), where there was rampant sexual immorality and the common practices of polygamy and polyandry, one thing that was a powerful witnessing tool was the difference between Christian marriage and societal norms. “In the first half of the nineteenth century it is believed that the Christian sacrament of Holy Matrimony was one of the attractions that drew Buddhists to Christian churches. The Buddhist leaders viewed this with great alarm” (De Neui and Lim, 2006:196).

Unfortunately, Buddhists in ancient Ceylon then created marriage rituals and rights that mirrored some of the external forms of Christian marriage. However, this does not detract from the fact that a marriage that is centred on Christ is a beautiful picture of the relationship between
Jesus and his bride, the church. Ephesians 5:31-33 says, “For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh. This is a profound mystery—but I am talking about Christ and the church. However, each one of you also must love his wife as he loves himself, and the wife must respect her husband.” The witness of two imperfect people loving each other and being faithful even in the hard times is a wonderful Christian example for a society that desperately needs hope in troubling times.

5.1.5 Conclusion of what has worked in the past

These four short examples illustrate what has worked in the past, but they are not the only thing that can be done in the future. These successes can be built upon and the strategies that have worked in the past, and even strategies that have never been employed can be used to see the furthering of the kingdom of God in Buddhist nations.

5.2 New approach and methodology

In this section, several critical tenets will be addressed, starting with the essential nature of godly character and how it is the lynchpin to successful interfaith encounters. Several cutting edge missional methodologies will also be briefly discoursed.

5.2.1 Character the most essential piece

There is no substitute for authentic godly character. There is no more powerful witness than godly character. “Knowing the assurance of salvation is one thing, communicating it to the Buddhist requires more than words but a radical witness of a life fully abandoned to God’s providence and loving care” (emphasis mine) (De Neui & Lim, 2006:39).
5.2.1.1 Humility and godly love

Colossians 3:12 exhorts missionaries, church planters and evangelists to be characterized by love and Christ-like humility: “Therefore, as God’s chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience” (emphasis mine). John 13:34-35 stratifies this principle that we are not only loved but to be a people of love as witnesses of Christ’s love: “A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.” When the body of Christ exhibits this kind of beautiful, sacrificial, godly love it will be a powerful tool of witness in the local communities within the Buddhist majority nations. The only caution here is to not over emphasize the love of God without recognizing the righteousness and judgment of God. “An Encounter that is firmly rooted in God’s sovereign character must hold both aspects of Gods righteous judgment and lovingkindness in creative tension” (Lim & Spaulding, 2005:16).

The starting point for an effective approach is that of humility and love. Bosch writes, “Both dialogue and mission can be conducted only in an attitude of humility” (Bosch, 2000:483), and then goes on to say that “such an attitude of humility is intrinsic to an authentic Christian faith” (Bosch, 2000:484). Tennent has this to say about not only sharing the gospel but living it out is a real way: “We see ourselves as commissioned to tell the story, but we don’t see ourselves as intrinsically part of the story. However, the church must do more than tell the gospel; we must embody it” (Tennent, 2010: 63). Corduan (1998:16) echoes this very same principle: “Christians should relate to other religions on the basis of sacrificial love… Presenting the Gospel to the World is a part of Christians total calling to lead overtly redeemed lives…This love expresses itself in an empathetic understanding of other people, humanitarian projects and consistent witness of God’s redemptive plan.”
Lim and Spaulding (2005:22) deliver the key to the correct attitude in that it proceeds out of a lifestyle of prayer. “The Interfaith Encounter proceeds with a combined attitude of prayer and spiritual warfare against powers of darkness as well as reconciliation and compassion toward unbelievers. Prayer that centres on the real enemy will generate within believers an attitude of dependence upon God and an attitude of humility and compassion in relation to people of other faiths.” Out of a committed prayer-life will spring the compassion, love and humility that is necessary to be a successful witness.

5.2.1.2 The wisdom of an ambassador mentality

As seen clearly in 2 Corinthians 5:18-20, not only are we ambassadors for Christ, but we are to take up the mission of reconciling people to God. “All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting people’s sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation. We are therefore Christ’s ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us. We implore you on Christ’s behalf: Be reconciled to God.”

Both Bosch and Koukl make the same recommendation when reaching out to people, taking the role of the ambassador. According to Bosch, “We do this, however, not as judges or lawyers, but as witnesses; not as soldiers, but as envoys of peace; not as high-pressure salespersons, but as ambassadors of the Servant Lord” (Bosch, 2000:489). Koukl’s (2009:20) winsome strategy uses the same terminology: “I want to suggest a method I call the Ambassador Model. This approach trades more on friendly curiosity – a kind of diplomacy – than on confrontation.” Koukl places more emphasis on friendly curiosity and on asking questions to help gently pry open the worldview of the person, in such a way that they
themselves examine the tenets of their own worldview. “However, it is not enough for followers of Jesus to have an accurately informed mind. Our knowledge must be tempered with the kind of wisdom that makes our message clear and persuasive. This requires the tools of a diplomat, not the weapons of a warrior, tactical skill rather than brute force” (Koukl, 2009: 24).

5.2.1.3 Gentleness that creates success

Gentleness is a godly attitude that is essential in honour-shame cultures. The Scriptures clearly outline the principle of gentleness but also readiness to witness. As 1 Peter 3:15-16 points out, “But in your hearts revere Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect, keeping a clear conscience, so that those who speak maliciously against your good behaviour in Christ may be ashamed of their slander.” This principle can also be found in multiple places in the Scriptures, including a direct reference in Proverbs 15:1: “A gentle answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger.”

The work of Bowers (a missional practitioner) that is represented in the book Sharing Jesus Effectively with the Buddhist World adds another virtue that in places as highly esteemed in the Eastern mind-set and that is one of gentleness. It is also one of the listed virtues of the fruit of the Spirit in Galatians 5:22. “The general pattern is gentleness. Both by prescription and example, the New Testament urges gentleness as a way to commend truth and expose error. The scriptures do not promote a proud prickly approach to proclamation” (Lim, Spaulding, and De Neui, 2005:116). Lim, Spaulding, and De Neui (2005:181) make the most thorough recommendation when it comes to an effective, long-term strategy that will resonate with the Buddhist peoples of Thailand, when it comes to character and the over-all approach of the missionary: “Missionaries and Thai Christians should Jai Yen (cool heart) and allow longer term build up their relationship with Buddhists because a genuine, long-term, and sincere relationship requires a longer time to build; allow themselves to become cultural insiders;
demonstrate Christ-likeness; live among them so that they know Buddhists’ needs; and spend time in dialoguing and laying down biblical foundations for them so that Buddhists can understand thoroughly what the gospel means.” Gentleness is the prescription that allows the conversation of the gospel to be heard in the Theravada Buddhist block. Along with gentleness, patience and sincerity make a huge difference when dealing with Thai Theravada Buddhist peoples.

5.2.2 Methodology

De Neui & Lim (2006:213) make the case that the place where contextualization begins is with understanding the worldview of the Buddhist people group and identifying with the specific subset of culture to which the missionary and church planter is sent. “We start from their worldview. Learn to understand and speak their language and use their forms of communication.” The shift from the older mission’s strategy to a newer strategy is to come to a culture and to people groups as learners—not coming primarily as teachers.

5.2.2.1 Seeking out what the Holy Spirit is already doing

Another essential shift is in focusing less on numerical outcomes and placing more of an emphasis on what the Spirit of God is actively doing within the people group: “It is the Holy Spirit who is central in the work of discipling and maturing communities of believers” (Tennent, 2010:73). Without the sovereign work of the Holy Spirit, salvation and evangelism will never be truly effective. Merely inviting the Holy Spirit into the existing missional plans for evangelising Buddhists is not enough—but to be led by the Holy Spirit and drawn into His plans. Smith and Kai (2011:74) place the emphasis of the success of a mission’s endeavour on the work of the Holy Spirit, without neglecting the responsibility of the church: “John 3
describes the Spirit of God as a wind. We cannot make him blow; He blows where He wills. We cannot create movements, only the Spirit of God can. But we can align ourselves, raise the sails of kingdom-oriented ministry, so that when the Spirit does blow, we are ready to move forward.” Tennent (2010:61) says that focus is the key to success, “Missions is about simultaneously entering into the inner life of God, as well as entering into the world where the triune God is actively at work.” When one focuses in on the inner life of God, then missional work becomes a natural outflow of what the Spirit of God is doing. Staying in step with the Spirit of God will lead to success.

5.2.2.2 Kingdom-oriented encounters

Lim & Spaulding, (2005:15) highlight another essential shift that comes in the form of what they term kingdom oriented theology as opposed to denominationally focused expansion:

The following foundational axioms for a kingdom-orientated theology of Christian-Buddhist Encounter are highlighted: (1) The kingdom orientated Encounter is based on the belief that God alone is king; (2) The kingdom orientated Encounter is Christ-centred; (3) The kingdom oriented Encounter is Trinitarian in nature; (4) The kingdom oriented Encounter transcends narrow ecclesiology; (5) The kingdom oriented Encounter is about God’s reign, not merely abstract ideas; (6) The kingdom oriented Encounter must be suffused by the eschatological hope in Christ; and (7) The kingdom oriented Encounter is totally dependent upon God’s sovereign activity.

Lim and Spaulding highlight these essentials, all of which can be seen in Scripture. These seven principles focus on Jesus’ priority: establishing and advancing the kingdom of God, not the works of men.

As was previously mentioned in section 3.3.1, the strategy within the Buddhist Block, needs to be less emphasis on individual salvation and on winning whole groups and entire households. “Missionaries should dare to win the whole family. Group decisions should be the target and goal of missionaries” (Lim, Spaulding, and De Neui, 2005:167). There are multiple biblical examples in which the entire family was saved: the Ephesian jailor’s family (Acts 16:34), the household of Lydia (Acts 16:13-15) and the family of Cornelius (Acts 10).
5.2.2.3 Non-aggressive evangelism

As previously mentioned in section 3.3.1 regarding honour-shame cultures, it is imperative that combative and aggressive strategies for evangelism be abandoned because they will not yield the profitable results, but do the exact opposite: “All confrontive strategies, especially direct confrontation of all kinds must be avoided” (Lim, Spaulding, and De Neui, 2005:168).

One way to be non-aggressive in our evangelism is to shift our expectations of what should occur in a single encounter. Koukl makes the point that many people are not ready for salvation, and one of his primary goals is not to immediately present the gospel, but to give them something to think on, something to gnaw at them, something that will move them closer to salvation. “My aim is never to win someone to Christ. I have a more modest goal, one you might consider adopting as your own. All I want is to put a stone in someone’s shoe. I want to give him something worth thinking about, something he can’t ignore because it continues to poke at him in a good way” (Koukl, 2009:38). Koukl is not saying that he does not desire to lead someone to Christ but that his immediate aim is smaller and subtler. His aim is primarily to prepare someone’s thinking and worldview for the gospel. The strategy of Koukl aligns itself well with the ideology of the Engel scale of salvation - in that all unsaved persons are on a scale and typically require multiple specific contacts to bring them to the event of salvation.

5.2.2.4 Understanding Theravada Buddhist literature

Another essential and difficult work for those in Theravada Buddhist nations is the reading and the understanding of Buddhist literature like the Dhammapada and the Pali Canon. The work in the Buddhist block requires missionaries and church planters that are willing to engage at the current level of understanding of Theravada Buddhist peoples. Reading of Buddhist literatures enables a Christian to begin understanding the spiritual teachings and similarities between Buddhism and Christianity. This will also allow them to see the
theological bridges (and or redemptive analogies) that can help start salvation conversations and relationships with Buddhists. Prayerfully reading and critically analysing Buddhist literature will give the Christian workers entry points into the Buddhist worldview, and may also reveal numerous specific redemptive analogies for Buddhists to understand salvation and righteousness.

5.2.2.5 Strategically translating the scriptures into the native language of the local people

A strategy that has been around since the inception of missions, but one that has not yet been completed, is the translation of God’s Word into the various heart languages of the local people. “A key to the successful local appropriation of Christian faith has been the translation of the Bible into local languages” (De Neui & Lim, 2006:109). Once the Word of God is in their own language, people groups often feel that a genuine expression of Christianity is possible. It is no longer a foreign religion or foreign concept but one that belongs to the local people.

5.2.2.6 Gospel-centred fun

Barclay makes a very valid point that the church and the life of Christ should represent the joy of the Lord, the love of the Lord and the irresistible appeal that comes from God: “There is too much of the Christianity which stodgily depresses a man, and too little of the Christianity which scintillates with life and charm” (Barclay, 1959:200). Churches planted within the Buddhist Majority nations ought to embrace all godly expressions of fun. Church gatherings (with the exception of funerals) should be inspiring, life-giving, joyous occasions as Christians fellowship, worship and evangelize.
The country of Thailand is a good example of various people groups that understand and have a collective culture of fun. Thai people have a very specific term for this type of life and activity; it is called sanuk or sanuke. “Sanuke(v): to have fun, to enjoy oneself, and to have a good time” (Lim, Spaulding, and De Neui, 2005:159). Lim, Spaulding, and De Neui (2005:162) cite Ayal (1963:58) in explaining the difference of approach in Thailand: “Unlike the compartmentalized approach of Americans, Thais have the expectation that all of their lives will contain sanuke. Work, study even religious service must have at least an element of sanuke if they are to retain the Thai’s interest. In fact, one reason why there are few Thai converts to Christianity is undoubtedly due to failure of the missionaries to make Christianity appear more sanuke”

The challenge here is to plant and transform young Churches into places that abound with life and fun, an approach which makes for an attractive, winsome way of life. Pastor Greg Laurie puts it this way: “I want to let you in on what might be a surprise: sharing your faith can be both exciting and, believe it or not, fun! As Psalm 126:6 reminds us, ‘Those who go out weeping, carrying seed to sow, will return with songs of joy, carrying sheaves with them’” (Laurie, 2016:12). Each time believers get together there is an opportunity for an element of fun, excitement and even outreach as a body.

5.2.2.7 Making disciples, not converts

“The goal of all mission work is the perfecting of the saints into sanctified, committed disciples of Christ. Jesus commanded us to go to all the nations, baptizing them and teaching them to obey all the things that he revealed” (Yohannan, 2004:57).

Eims’ (1978:18) definition for successful discipleship is: “People who know how to win others to Christ and then take that person from the time of conversion and help him become
a solid, dedicated, committed, fruitful, mature disciple who could in time repeat the process in the life of another.” That is the effective outcome of a mature disciple, one who is able to effectively disciple others.

Yohannan elaborates on his missional strategy of discipleship; however, his strategy eliminates the use of Western missionaries entirely. The clear majority of other missional discipleship strategies utilizes Western missionaries in a variety of different ways. Yohannan’s strategy at Gospel for Asia has been effective in India and various other Southeast Asian countries. Gospel for Asia employs and utilizes exclusively local Asian peoples to reach lost Asian peoples. A disciple in India does not need to learn the language, culture and customs of India in order to be an effective evangelist within the sub-continent of India. In addition to this, an Indian evangelist is significantly closer in customs and culture to Pakistan than a Westerner is. “Tens of thousands of national missionaries are being raised up by the Lord in all these Two-Thirds World nations right now. They are Asians, many of whom already live in the nation they must reach or in nearby cultures just a few hundred miles from the unevangelized villages to which they will be sent by the Lord” (Yohannan, 2004:153).

How discipleship can be fulfilled per Baker and Eims is only by close contact and long-term relationships with committed and mature believers. “I see the great importance and need of mature mentors and leaders in the worldwide church, people ready to guide, challenge and teach us. Without such help, we remain weak and immature” (Baker, 2009:104). In emphasizing the role of the mentor and close protracted contact with disciples, Eims (1978:105) puts it this way: “Like minded, trustworthy, competent men are not made on a production line like automobiles in an assembly plant. They are carefully and prayerfully developed under the loving guidance of a wise trainer who spends much time on his knees praying for them.” Smith reiterates the need to make disciples using a Church-planting movement strategy. However, Smith’s (2011:78) focus is on leading people to radically rely
on the Holy Spirit and see the Spirit of God move deeply and quickly in new and very young believers. “Any discipleship program that creates a dependence on the human teacher rather than the ever-present Teacher of the Spirit is doomed to a plodding human-dependant growth. In contrast Church-planting movements are centred on enabling all believers to rely on the Spirit of God in fulfilling God’s purposes and His calling in their life.” Smith’s vision competes with Eim’s vision of taking a few people to a deep level of discipleship in order to have those people take a few people deep.

Irrespective of which model is used—Eim’s, Yohannan’s or Smith’s CPM model—there is a great need to make disciples, not just see people saved, but see them maturing, growing in their relationship with the Lord and then helping do this very same thing for others.

5.2.2.8 Conclusion about evangelism methodology adjustments

Many of the afore mentioned modifications are already being recognized and implemented in a variety of mission-fields. This is by no means an exhaustive list of things that need to be addressed in the Buddhist majority nations, but this provides a starting point for opening the conversation of adjusting of current missional strategy.

5.3 Church planting in the eastern cultural mind-set

There is no single strategy that works universally in terms of church planting, but there are several strategies that have worked in a variety of contexts that will be briefly examined and compared in this section. Some general principles will also be briefly discussed. This is by no means an exhaustive list (due to the fact that this section could be a master’s dissertation of its own). Frost and Hirsch (2007:6) make this assertion about church planting: “We do not
advocate a one-size-fits all approach to church planting and church growth.” What might be effective in urban Thailand may be completely ineffective in rural Sri Lanka.

5.3.1 Defining effective church planting

A successful church plant can be defined as a body of believers that have come to a saving faith in Jesus Christ, have started fellowshipping together, are self-supporting, self-sustaining and self-propagating (beginning the work of evangelising their own culture). Once that independence has taken place and a few essentials have been set up, it can be termed an effective church plant.

Allen and Hirsch (2007:78) have this to say about what constitutes the three essentials of a complete church: “Worship and mission and the development of Christian community must inform each other closely and regularly.” All three of these elements are essential to what constitutes a church, although these three elements will be expressed differently in different denominations and within different cultures; they must be present in order to constitute a church. Allen and Hirsch (2007:79) then go on to specify that correct communion (worship), proper community and commission (gospel centred, sharing, giving and serving) would be a more exhaustive way of looking at the three interconnected categories.

Lim & Spaulding, (2005:23) firmly agree with Allen and Hirsch in saying that if one of these elements are not in place in a local body then that body ceases to fulfil what constitutes a church. “When the Church becomes concerned only with its own religious needs and loses its kingdom orientation towards serving the world, then the church can no longer be identified with the kingdom of God.” This warning from Lim and Spaulding to the church is to never become so self-focused or self-absorbed, whereas Allen and Hirsch say that if any of the three essentials are missing then that church ceases to be a church.
An effective church plant not only is culturally relevant and actively engaged in the three different distinctives that make it a church but also is able to impact a variety of different groups within its own body. “To function most effectively, the church must adapt itself to meet the needs of non-Christians, new Christians, lukewarm Christians, and committed Christians in different ways” (Eims.1978:51). These distinct groups need to be handled, discipled and worked with differently.

5.3.2 The difficulty in church planting in Buddhist majority nations

Some of the difficulties within the Buddhist majority nations stem from the fact that missionary work is illegal in most of those nations. “Now 86 nations – with more than a half of the world’s population – forbid or seriously restrict foreign missionaries” (Yohannan.2004:156). Although this number fluctuates, it still illustrates the extreme difficulty in many Buddhist majority nations. So, the initial difficulty and subsequent resistance often stems from the fact that missionary work is illegal in these countries.

Another difficulty that can be seen in the Buddhist block comes from a warning from Oswald Smith (1999:79):

Our methods as a church have not been scriptural. Hence, the world is still unevangelized in spite of all our efforts. Paul, the greatest and most successful missionary the world has ever known did not become a pastor. He travelled, preached, won converts, organized churches, placed them under native leadership, and passed on. He did not attempt to change the manners and customs of the people. The Gospel, where necessary, did that. He placed the responsibility upon the natives themselves, made the churches founded self-supporting and self-propagating, and that from the very start He founded no colleges, built no hospitals and erected no church buildings. The natives provided for their own needs. (emphasis mine)

Smith is criticizing several things in modern missions that he feels are unscriptural. Although his insight is in no way exhaustive, there are several critical insights can be gleaned from this short passage out of his 1956 work (re-published in 1999). Smith compares the Apostle Paul’s
biblical method of church planting to what had been done up to his time in missions. Smith examines what strategy was so successful in the first century ministry of Paul. Smith’s comments and subsequent proposal do not take into account the fact that the record of Paul’s methodology is not exhaustive, in that there is much to Paul’s success and failures that is completely unknown to the modern church.

Smith’s insights summarized are:

1. Per Smith, Paul was never drawn into pastoring a local congregation for a protracted engagement, but kept mobile enough to start and encourage many local congregations throughout Asia Minor. Paul focused primarily on evangelism.

2. Per Smith, Paul let the new local converts do the “heavy-lifting” of contextualizing forms and styles. Paul did not engage in changing the customs, manners and styles of local believers but allowed them to discriminate between the forms that were acceptable and those that had to be shunned.

3. Per Smith, Paul placed the burden of contextualization and leadership on local believers shortly after conversion.

Immanent critique of Smith comes in the form of several observations. For one thing, Acts 18:9-11 says, “One night the Lord spoke to Paul in a vision: ’Do not be afraid; keep on speaking, do not be silent. For I am with you, and no one is going to attack and harm you, because I have many people in this city.’” So, Paul stayed in Corinth for a year and a half, teaching them the word of God.” So, there was at least one instance where Paul stayed in one place and worked extensively in Corinth. In addition to this, Acts 20:31 makes it crystal clear that Paul worked in and lived at Ephesus for 3 years. A second immanent critique of Smith comes from Paul’s extensive letters and visits; from these it can be easily deduced that Paul personally did follow up and make sure that other qualified Christian missionaries spent intentional time with church plants and with leadership, as witnessed by Timothy and Titus.
However, Smith does have three strategic pointers for effective missions within Theravada Buddhist countries. Firstly, that if a missionary settles down and pastors in one area, there is much work that could also be done in an entire region that cannot be done with intensive pastoring work. Secondly as will be discussed in section 5.3.5.3 utilizing local believers is an essential principle for contextualization and lastly that local believers need to be utilized for local leadership.

5.3.3 Examining the strengths and weaknesses of the historical monastic model

For hundreds of years Christianity both used and multiplied monasteries and used them as centres for evangelism, manuscript copying, healthcare and much more. The Roman Catholic Church between 313 and 590 used a monastic model to carry out the Great Commission by the ordaining, training and motivating of Christian monks who would convey both God’s word and God’s message to the non-Western tribes of the time. “The Monasteries, centres where manuscripts were carefully preserved and copied, were a great aid in her fulfilment of this function. Confronting her was also the task of being light to give the gospel to the peoples making up the masses of wandering tribesmen. This she did through the work of missionary monks, and she succeeded in the mighty task of winning the tribes to the Christian faith” (Cairns, 1996:118). This is neither an endorsement for nor statement against the Roman Catholic Church, but merely the observation that in history this strategy worked fairly effectively for hundreds of years.

There were several of the early Church fathers that used a monastic type strategy in their time and in the culture where it was very effective. The church father, Basil, was an example of a successful church father that succeeded in the early church to be a light and salt in an opposing pagan culture. “Basil linked the monk’s life with service of the needy. Basil
tells us that after he became the bishop of Caesarea he provided a series of great buildings just outside the city, for the work done by the monks. There was a guest house for travellers; a hospital with doctors, nurses and attendants; a poor house where men could learn a trade; and even a home for lepers” (Foster, 1991:159).

The Buddhist thinking already endorses the assistance of the poor and needy, and this simple strategy of evangelism using community development is a time proven model. The Buddhist perspective views the assistance of the poor as a method to earn merit (good karma) but to the Christian this can be done as a witness of the new way of life given by Jesus. “The church as a missionary body must not only bear the message but also embody it. The church must reflect the Incarnation as an ongoing expression of the unfolding drama of God’s mission in the World” (Tennent, 2010: 82).

The immanent critique of the monastic model is that it fails to contextualize relationships of missionary and the local people. The monastic model used to regularly send the message, knowingly or unknowingly, that the missionary is different and or above a local people—not with them. A suggested fix to this model would have been to use parts of the monastic model but also to live incarnationally, among the people and identify with them in their local lifestyles.

Yet another immanent critique of the monastic model is that it represents imperialism to many different cultures, and due to past abuses of power and authority it is not always accepted in a welcoming spirit. As seen in the historical look at Sri Lanka, the Theravada Buddhists in Sri Lanka looked at the missionary efforts as an attempt to colonize, patronize and Westernize the local populations.

In conclusion, there are some parts of the monastic model that may be used and carefully, prayerfully implemented in Theravada countries, as led by the Spirit of God. It is
essential that incarnation living, and ministering be a part of the movement, and that the pitfalls of imperialism be avoided at all costs.

5.3.4 Temple strategy in Thailand

The example of Thailand prompts the question as to if a “temple strategy” might be an effective tool in reaching the various Thai people groups. “In Buddhist societies, temples fulfil religious, social, psychological, anthropological/sociological, spiritual, and other functions. To what extent has the Christian missionary enterprise failed the Buddhist communities to which it has come by not adequate establishing a dynamic-equivalence structure?” (Lim, Spaulding, and De Neui, 2005:189). The basis of this question raises several issues such as: Can a Christian missionary movement adopt a temple ethos, and yet still remain faithful to the new covenant of Jesus Christ? If these are the expectations that the Thai peoples have of religions, are modern missionary efforts doing them a disservice by presenting only one style of Christianity?

Granted, we know theologically that the body of Christ has become the new temple of God. According to 1 Corinthians 6:19-20, “Do you not know that your bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God? You are not your own; you were bought at a price. Therefore, honour God with your bodies.” At the same time, the strategic question from Thailand is, does the Christian church fulfil all the religious, social, psychological, anthropological and spiritual needs of the peoples that are in Thailand? And what can be done to refine the church planting movement in Thailand so that it fits a more holistic expectation of the general Thai population?

A temple strategy might take on some of the cultural forms that are found in Thailand, and would look to fulfil some of the religious, social, psychological, anthropological sociological and spiritual needs of the local peoples. It would have to be very intentional to not
syncretize any non-Christian practices. This type of contextual work can be done by believers in Thailand that can accurately say what things can and which things cannot be incorporated.

5.3.5 General principles of effective church planting

This sub-section examines several different strategies of effective church planting. These general principles are some of the keys that have been utilized in successful church planting.

5.3.5.1 Spirit filled, Spirit moved, Spirit first

In the same manner as evangelism and worldview, the pre-eminence in church planting principles is identifying what the Holy Spirit is already doing and staying in step with that sovereign work. Yohannan (2004:158) puts it this way: “The Holy Spirit when we give him the freedom to work, prompts spontaneous growth and expansion (of the church).” Focus on the Holy Spirit is a key essential to effective church planting, as is the principle of engaging the entire church. “Scholars of Acts agree: this movement took place in the power of the Holy Spirit through the lives of ordinary, months-old and even weeks-old believers as they were equipped by the apostles and other believers” (Smith & Kai. 2011:31).

5.3.5.2 Place and function of prayer

Prayer is one of the most important founding and sustaining principles of church planting. “These two disciplines, living with God’s Word and learning to pray, form the basis for the new believers’ relationship with God. They are the primary tools for communicating with God. They must hear His voice through the Word of God and they must speak with Him
through the means of prayer” (Coppedge, 1989:136). Prayer is one of the foundational principles of the faith that cannot be underestimated or neglected. “For those explorers in the faith, prayer was no little habit tacked onto the periphery of their lives; it was their lives. It was the most serious work of their most productive years” (Foster, 1998:34). Prayer is the very serious, essential work that needs to take place for the church to be effectively planted.

5.3.5.3 Utilizing local believers

One of the most effective principles to planting effective and authentic churches in Theravada contexts is local believers themselves, from these specific contexts. Smith and Kai (2011:23) make this observation: “Through repeated readings of Matthew 10, Luke 10 and the book of Acts, God led us to a different strategy. If people who looked like the Ina – other Asians – could discreetly enter the Ina villages to share the gospel and disciple them, perhaps the authorities would not notice for a while.” This strategy is what will be referred to as the indigenous strategy.

The T4T discipleship movement uses an indigenous strategy that has three distinct principles as found in the Great Commission: “Go, not come: We must go to where the lost are, and train the new believers to also go where the lost are. Everyone, not just some. Make disciples of all not just a few. Make disciples not just church members. He wants believers to be true disciples - every disciple should be a trainer” (Smith & Kai. 2011:35). Per Smith and Kai, these three church planting principles have seen explosive growth even in Asia contexts that have not previously had much success.

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5 T4T is called Training for Trainers, and it is a culturally relevant Church Planting Movement that utilizes ALL believers as evangelists and church planters. It is a rapid growth movement that is dependent upon local believers and upon the guidance of the Holy Spirit. For security purposes, they do not outline exactly which countries they work in, but many of them are Asian countries.
5.3.5.4 Planning to use the whole body of Christ not just a select few

This principle that is emerging within church planting circles is that of utilizing the whole church, not just focusing on a few talented and gifted individuals. In commenting on the new shape and dynamic that is coming in the 21st century church, Frost & Hirsh (2007:11) agree with Smith and Kai: “The church seeks to discern God’s specific missional vocation for the entire community and for ALL of its members.” Smith & Kai (2011:25) confirm this principle by saying: “Every obedient believer can be a witness and disciple of others. Every church can start churches.” The entire body of believers can be utilized in the critical work of planting, evangelising and creating new churches. This methodology has seen explosive growth in areas where it has been successfully implemented.

5.3.6 Naturalized, authentic church expressions

Allen (1997:19) proposes a complete shift away from Western missions: “If faith does not become naturalized (properly contextualized) and expanded among the people by its own vital power, it exercises an alarming and hateful influence, and men fear and shun it as something alien.” Allen and KP Yohannan of Gospel for Asia argue that the Western model planted the church, but the church must be contextualized and spread by native believers in order to avoid not only the pitfalls of Western influence but also create and authentic expression of Asian Christianity. The Asia church must plant, support and grow the Asia church so that it will not be perceived as foreign, alien or something Western. KP Yohannan (2004:156) goes one step further than Allen to assert that when Western missionaries are removed from the context of Asian soil, the mission’s effort is not stilted but freed up to grow and flourish:

Now 86 nations – with more than a half of the world’s population – forbid or seriously restrict foreign missionaries. But there is a bright side to the story. The effect of all this on the emerging churches of Asia has been electric. Far from slowing the Gospel, the
withdrawal of foreign missionaries has freed the Gospel from the Western traditions that foreign missionaries had unwittingly added to it.

It is this author’s opinion that KP Yohannan steps too far in the direction of eliminating all Western missionary influence – in that, there are many valuable things that Western churches and missionaries can help the effort in the Buddhist block, but Yohannan urges that the Western church only support the work within the Buddhist Theravada countries financially. This author’s opinion is that Yohannan and GFA have in effect, cut their movement off from the maturing influences, from prayer support, from seasoned missional veterans who have much to give in the way of discipleship, mentoring and teaching.

5.3.7 Conclusions about church planting in Buddhist majority countries

The principles of being filled with and moved by the Spirit are essential to authentic churches in the Buddhist majority nations. There is no substitute for prayer and intercession as the leading force in planting churches and growing disciples. Local believers and local leadership of believers are essential in contextualization and in becoming authentically Asian churches. The entire body of believers can and should be utilized in evangelism, church-planting, missions and prayer. Getting the Holy Scriptures into the heart language of the local people is another essential piece in the local believers’ owning and living out the gospel.

One of the only ways for church planting to be effective (irrespective of which model is adopted) is for total transformation of entire segments of society. “Jesus’ total mission encompasses the challenge of discipleship, the confrontation with demonic powers and religious authorities, a compassion for the lost, and the creation of a new society. The implications for interfaith encounters are profound. Christians are not merely to be interested in sharing the gospel but also seeking the total transformation of the person and society” (Lim
& Spaulding, 2005:20). Community transformation and church planting are the goal for success to be seen in the Buddhist Block.
6. Conclusion and findings

The undertaking of Christians to reach Buddhists is an extensive one. Still Christians can be assured that applying the principles of solid, time-tested and proven evangelism with a prior and thorough understanding of and apologetic handling of the Buddhist worldview, teachings and culture, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, can and will open these people to the good news of the gospel of Jesus Christ. The missionary needs to take culture, worldview and the specific sub-set of people into consideration when looking at how best to present Christ.

The contextual approach is the best way to present the gospel in a way that is relevant, understandable and fits the culture to which it is presented: “Contextualization is simply the process of making the gospel understood” (Wu. 2016:4). Contextualization of the gospel and its proper proclamation is not only biblical but essential to seeing effective evangelization and church-planting within the Theravada Buddhist context. Smith (1999:85) summarizes many of the observations and findings of this paper:

My Brethren, you may or may not agree with all that I have said. But one thing you cannot deny. Thus far we have failed to evangelize the world. Then we must admit that something is wrong. Have we ever thought that it might be our methods? Will the plan generally in vogue work? I think we must all agree that it will not. Then why not consider another? A plan tried and tested by the Early Church. A plan fitted to every country of the world. A plan that succeeds wherever it is put into practice. A plan that completely solves the financial problem. A plan through which the Holy Spirit can operate. God’s plan. God’s way.
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Buddhist Word index

Ahimsa: The principle of not taking life.

Arhat / arahant: (Sanskrit) “In Sanskrit, “Worthy one” who has destroyed the afflictions and all causes for future rebirth and who thus will enter nirvana at death” (Buswell & Lopez. 2014:62).

Anatta: The doctrine of no-self.

Annica: Impermanence of all things.

Atman: Self.

Auto-soterism: The ability to liberate or to save oneself.

Bhavanga: an inactive level of mind that is still present when no overt mental activity is occurring (Williams, Tribe, and Wynne, 2012:91).

bhikkus (also called bikhus): Monks.

Bodhisattva (Mahayana concept): A powerful being that can take as many forms as needed in order to help beings escape suffering. (Valea, 2008:181).

Chanda: Positive emotion.

Devas: gods.

Dharma (Sanskrit): Buddhist set of teaching.

Dharmadhatus (Sanskrit): Is the place or range of the Dharma or ‘Absolute Reality’.

Dukkha (Pali): Suffering or pain.
Jai Yen (Thai): Cool heart – or attitude.

Karma: The law of one’s actions effecting how one’s khandas will be reborn.

Khandas (Pali): The five aggregates that make up what is conventionally known as a human being.

Koine (Greek): A specific type of Greek that was common, street Greek, that an average speaker in the first century would have understood clearly. This can be distinguished from Classical Greek and modern Greek (although they all bear similarities).

Moksha: Release, emancipation, freedom.

Pattidana (Pali): The transfer of merit from one to another to enable a better rebirth (Patti: merit, Dana: giving).

Pleroma (Greek): The fullness (completeness) of God that is in Christ.

Puggala: The false notion of personhood.

Rupa (Pali): The physical body (1 of the five aggregates) (Valea, 2008:91).

Sanuke, Sanuk (Thai, verb): to have fun, to enjoy oneself, and to have a good time” (Lim, Spaulding, and De Neui, 2005:159).

Samkhara (Pali): That which originates initiative. (1 of the five aggregates) (Valea, 2008:91).

Sangha: The community of Buddhist Adherents.

Sanna (Pali): Cognition (1 of the five aggregates) (Valea, 2008:91).

Tathagata: Honorary title used only of the Buddha.

Tanha: Evil desire.
Theravadan, Theravadin: One who subscribes to the teachings of the elders, the conservatives - the strict adherents of the Pali cannon.

*Missio Dei* (Latin): The mission of God on Earth.

*Nibbana* (Pali): Literally means "the quenching of"; idiomatically it means attaining the end of the samsara, the cycle of pain, death and rebirth. Only comes through enlightenment.

Nirvana (Sanskrit): Equivalent of *Nibbana*.


*Sunyata*: “Emptiness” (Madhyamika view) or “mind/consciousness” (Yogicara view).

Theravadin: Adherent to the strict doctrine of the Elders, a conservative position of traditional Buddhism.

*Upaya*: The use of various skillful means in order to lead one closer to enlightenment.

*Vedana* (Pali): Feeling, sensation of the 5 sense organs (1 of the 5 aggregates) (Valea, 2008:91).