

WHY  
*EVANGELICAL*  
*THEOLOGY*  
NEEDS THE  
GLOBAL CHURCH



Stephen T. Pardue

“Pardue challenges us with the truth that theology is not neutral. By considering the authority of Scripture and taking contextual realities seriously, he challenges our assumptions about and broadens our understanding of Scripture, its interpretation, and its application. This book is an encouragement to readers to embrace the concept of unity in diversity that is vividly illustrated in Revelation 7. Pardue has succeeded in inviting Majority World evangelical voices into the theological conversation that has, for too long, been dominated by the West.”

—**Elizabeth Mburu**, Africa International University, Kenya;  
Langham Literature Regional Coordinator, Anglophone Africa

“For too long, fear of compromising the primacy of Scripture has led evangelicals to marginalize the role of the Christian tradition and local cultures. In this lucid and well-argued work, Pardue has shown that tradition and culture are in fact indispensable theological resources for developing a robust ‘catholic contextual theology.’ Here is a work in constructive theology that should set the direction for the global evangelical movement.”

—**Simon Chan**, editor, *Asia Journal of Theology*

“At the very moment when evangelical theologians are struggling with cultural issues on the Western home front, Pardue calls them to look east and south, to learn from the global church how to engage one’s local context while maintaining biblical authority and respecting the Christian tradition. This is a signal contribution to evangelical theology from one who identifies with and understands both it and the global church. Pardue here integrates canon, culture, and catholicity in five theses that have the potential to revitalize evangelical theology in the West and worldwide.”

—**Kevin J. Vanhoozer**, Trinity Evangelical Divinity School

“Pardue offers an impressively informed argument for Western evangelicals to welcome theological contributions from around the world. He responds to misgivings about the impact of culture on the theological enterprise by drawing on basic evangelical commitments and constructive work by significant Majority World scholars. This is a broad vision that conceives of a church committed to Scripture, diverse yet seeking unity, relevant yet appreciative of the Great Tradition. The tone is gracious, but the call is timely and challenging!”

—**M. Daniel Carroll R. (Rodas)**, Wheaton College and Graduate School

“Affirming the diversity but unity of the church, Pardue calls for an evangelical theology that engages with world Christianity—both past and present. *Why Evangelical Theology Needs the Global Church* provides solid theological frameworks along with relevant case studies that support a vision of an evangelical theology enriched by contextual and historical expressions of the Christian faith. This book is a gem, a precious gift to the global church!”

—**Theresa R. Lua**, general secretary, Asia Theological Association;  
director, Global Theology, World Evangelical Alliance

“Pardue bravely takes on Western evangelical theologians’ varied responses to broad theological issues pertaining to the phenomenon of the global church and the field of contextual theology. His engagement with these issues is refreshing, insightful, and constructive.”

—**Victor I. Ezigbo**, Bethel University

“*Why Evangelical Theology Needs the Global Church* is at once a theology of culture, a theology of plurality, and even a theology of ethnicity and the nations (the Greek *ethnos*, in the New Testament, is often translated ‘nations’), although it is *not* a theology of nationalism (in the West or anywhere!). Pardue writes out of a hermeneutic of charity that welcomes the many voices from the global church to engage with the biblical and historic theological traditions, and hence invites us all to consider our own posture toward others that we may before have held at arm’s length.”

—**Amos Yong**, Fuller Theological Seminary

“Pardue’s book is a timely and unique contribution to evangelical theology. He takes seriously the reality that evangelicalism is a worldwide movement, burgeoning especially in non-Western contexts, and makes a compelling theological case for principled engagement with global theology. He critically and charitably interacts with past attempts at embracing ‘contextual’ theologies and presents a way forward rooted in the doctrine of the church. The book is also helpful in providing illustrative case studies. Pardue is an expert and wise guide through this increasingly important terrain. I hope this book becomes the standard reference point for future conversations regarding how Western theology engages with the contributions of the Majority World.”

—**Uche Anizor**, Talbot School of Theology, Biola University

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**Stephen T. Pardue**



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To Dan Treier  
*faithful saint, wise mentor, trusted friend*





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# Introduction

This book seeks to answer a question that is hardly new but that has yet to receive adequate attention: What difference does it make for the practice of evangelical theology that the church is no longer primarily rooted in North America and Europe but increasingly comprises people from an astonishing variety of cultures and nations?

Over the last several decades, historians and missiologists have generally succeeded in making the case for studying the phenomenon of world Christianity.<sup>1</sup> For historians of Christianity, this means seeking to understand the history, nature, and future of Christianity as a global faith. Many have rightly noted that Western Christians will increasingly need to reckon with the reality that the faith's demographic center has radically shifted away from them, creating long-term questions about who will lead the next generation of churches and what form such new churches will take.<sup>2</sup> Yet these books typically only graze the edge of theological questions, asking, for example, how North American mainline churches will reconcile their

1. For a helpful overview, see Jonathan Y. Tan and Anh Q. Tran, SJ, eds., *World Christianity: Perspectives and Insights; Essays in Honor of Peter C. Phan* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2016).

2. For several prominent examples, see Philip Jenkins, *The Next Christendom: The Coming of Global Christianity*, 3rd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011); Mark A. Noll, *The New Shape of World Christianity: How American Experience Reflects Global Faith* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2009); Mark A. Noll, *From Every Tribe and Nation: A Historian's Discovery of the Global Christian Story* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2014); Scott W. Sunquist, *The Unexpected Christian Century: The Reversal and Transformation of Global Christianity, 1900–2000* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2015).

progressive approach to sexual ethics with the conservative approaches of their African counterparts.<sup>3</sup>

Perhaps closer still to our task are the discussions missiologists have been having for decades. Since at least the 1980s, missiologists have been a voice in the wilderness, calling evangelicals to recognize the contextually situated nature of their theology.<sup>4</sup> In addition, they have often highlighted the new ways in which evangelical beliefs have been or might be contextualized in order to facilitate better communication between Christians and their host cultures around the globe.<sup>5</sup> In some cases, they have even begun the process on behalf of evangelical theologians, bringing key theological topics into dialogue with global missions and world religions, raising excellent questions and yielding helpful theological insights.<sup>6</sup>

But theologians have a different vocation than our counterparts in history and missiology. We are not primarily called to document the changes in the church's center of gravity or to offer strategies for evangelism and missions, though such discussions are often complementary to the theological task. Rather, the unique calling of the theologian is to consider God and all things in relation to him. Theology exists because God has spoken, revealing himself and his designs for his people in Holy Scripture. The theologian's prime directive, therefore, is to guide the church in the patient, disciplined work of hearing and obeying the God who has rescued them and seeks the reconciliation of all things by the blood of his cross (Col. 1:20; 2 Cor. 5:18–20). It is

3. For example, this disagreement comes up multiple times in Philip Jenkins, *The New Faces of Christianity: Believing the Bible in the Global South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006).

4. E.g., David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1991); A. Scott Moreau, *Contextualization in World Missions: Mapping and Assessing Evangelical Models* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2012); Hwa Yung, *Mangoes or Bananas? The Quest for an Authentic Asian Christian Theology*, 2nd ed. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2014); Allen Yeh and Tite Tiénou, eds., *Majority World Theologies: Theologizing from Africa, Asia, Latin America, and the Ends of the Earth* (Littleton, CO: William Carey, 2018).

5. E.g., Bruce J. Nicholls, *Contextualization: A Theology of Gospel and Culture* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1979); David J. Hesselgrave and Edward Rommen, *Contextualization: Meanings, Methods, and Models* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1989); Dean Flemming, *Contextualization in the New Testament: Patterns for Theology and Mission* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2005); Moreau, *Contextualization in World Missions*.

6. See, e.g., Craig Ott and Harold A. Netland, eds., *Globalizing Theology: Belief and Practice in an Era of World Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006); Timothy C. Tennent, *Theology in the Context of World Christianity: How the Global Church Is Influencing the Way We Think About and Discuss Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007); Matthew Cook et al., eds., *Local Theology for the Global Church: Principles for an Evangelical Approach to Contextualization* (Pasadena, CA: World Evangelical Alliance Theological Commission, 2010).

characteristic of the evangelical accent that the theological task is carried out not only with a joyful confidence in Scripture's authority and relevance but also alongside an abiding conviction that the news of Christ's atoning work is so good that it requires sharing with others. Moreover, evangelical theologians call the church to a life in step with the Spirit, who quickens and enables his people to echo divine holiness and justice.<sup>7</sup>

It is heartening that in the past two decades many leaders have publicly expressed their conviction that evangelical theology must reckon with the theological expressions of Majority World churches (which now outnumber in membership the historically dominant churches of North America and Europe). More heartening still is the proliferation of insightful theological work emerging from evangelical scholars in the Majority World, and the promise of much more to come in the years ahead.

Yet several challenges threaten to stifle this progress. The first is simply a matter of accessibility and awareness. Too often, students and scholars seeking to learn from theologians in the Majority World struggle to find the best resources emerging from the wider church. Sometimes this is because resources are written in an inaccessible language or published only locally. While there is still a long way to go, good resources are increasingly becoming available globally through translators and publishers who recognize that these resources and the theologians behind them bring fresh insight on the Christian faith. Yet even so, readers new to these regional works often face a bewildering diversity of voices and lack the necessary context to appreciate the proposals they encounter.<sup>8</sup> While by no means offering a comprehensive guide, this book highlights theological works that are especially helpful for evangelical students and scholars new to this conversation. Along the way, I will also articulate categories and commendations that may help readers discern how to engage these works more productively.

7. This description of evangelical theology is designed to echo David Bebbington's observations about the characteristics common to evangelicals as a group: conversionism, activism, biblicism, and crucicentrism (D. W. Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain: A History from the 1730s to the 1980s* [Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1989], 4; Timothy Larsen, "Defining and Locating Evangelicalism," in *The Cambridge Companion to Evangelical Theology*, ed. Timothy Larsen and Daniel J. Treier [New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007], 1–14).

8. This is a challenge not only for readers in North America and Europe but also for students and scholars in the Majority World. My students in Southeast Asia often find it difficult to find productive dialogue partners from other regions in Asia, let alone from Africa or Latin America.



A second, and more substantive, challenge is that significant questions still swirl around this movement for evangelical students and scholars in both the West and the Majority World. For some, there is basic skepticism about giving culture a seat at the theological table and an expressed preference for theology that is strictly biblical or exegetical in its method. Others might be inclined to learn from their counterparts in the Majority World but struggle when pressed to explain the theological reasons for their confidence in this enterprise. They may sense that it is not enough to pay attention to the realities of world Christianity out of a sense of political correctness or a naive admiration of “diversity” or “multiculturalism.” They may recognize the insufficiency of pursuing these efforts out of merely pragmatic considerations, even with a growing demand for literature and resources attuned to the needs of Christians living in the Majority World. This book argues that there are compelling reasons internal to the Christian faith—and connected to evangelical theological commitments in particular—that should lead us to attend to the Spirit’s ongoing work in the global church. Indeed, I will argue that we ought to regard the theologies emerging in Asia, Africa, and Latin America as underutilized resources for twenty-first century saints.

This leads to a third concern that often stifles the movement to bring Majority World theology into greater dialogue with evangelical thinkers: the vision for “contextual theology” (a term that will need some clarification) that has emerged in the last forty years is often unnecessarily narrow and in tension with evangelical theological commitments. An example is instructive here. Years ago, Singaporean theologian Simon Chan noted that what counts as “Asian theology” in most Western textbooks is almost universally characterized by “uncritical assimilation of Enlightenment epistemology.” In practice, this generally means a strong suspicion of Scripture and Christian tradition and a preference for views that minimize Christian particularity.<sup>9</sup> Ironically, these commitments mean that what is marketed as “Asian theology” aligns far more with the values and beliefs regnant in Western academia than with the actual faith lived out in the vibrant and rapidly expanding Asian church, which generally has a high view of Scripture, openness to Christian tradition, and a robust commitment to the unique power of Jesus. As a result, academic theological work in this area ignores

9. Simon Chan, *Grassroots Asian Theology: Thinking the Faith from the Ground Up* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2014), 24.

“vast swaths of Christian movements in Asia: the evangelical and Pentecostal movements in much of Asia and, more specifically, the indigenous Christian movements in India, Japan and China.”<sup>10</sup>

Chan’s critique applies far beyond the boundaries of Asia. Around the globe there is a palpable gap between the scholarly work prescribing fresh and innovative visions of Christian theology and the faith of the everyday Christians who make up the rapidly growing Majority World church. Liberation theology, probably the most widely recognized example of “contextual theology” in Latin America, is another case in point. At least in its original expression—a potent mixture of Marxist ideology and biblical prophetic critique of oppressive social structures that emerged in the 1960s and 1970s—it has largely been rejected or ignored by vast segments of the church. The poor in Latin America, with whom the movement sought solidarity and to whom it offered a word of hope, have generally adopted other forms of Christianity centered more on divine revelation, Scripture, and a powerful experience of God’s Spirit. As one observer wryly put it, “While Liberation Theology opted for the poor, the poor opted for Pentecostalism.”<sup>11</sup>

The point here is not that theology must conform to the will of the largest groups of people, as if theology should be a functionally democratic or populist enterprise. On the contrary, sometimes speaking of the triune God faithfully will mean being a lone voice in the wilderness. Nor is it the case that academic theology has nothing to offer the church if its value is not immediately recognizable by everyday Christians. Often, academic theology takes a crucial step toward casting a new vision, even if that vision requires translation and adjustment to take real hold in the wider church. For example, while the often-utopian vision of the first-generation theologies of liberation may have won few minds and hearts, the movement unquestionably led most Christians, including evangelicals, to grasp the gospel’s profound implications for economics and social justice in a new way.<sup>12</sup>

Yet in general, the chasm between prominent accounts of Asian, African, and Latin American theology and the lived faith of everyday Christians

10. Chan, *Grassroots Asian Theology*, 24.

11. This comment is documented in Donald E. Miller and Tetsunao Yamamori, *Global Pentecostalism: The New Face of Christian Social Engagement* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), 12.

12. In fact, the story of liberation theology and evangelical movements that developed alongside it in Latin America has important implications for how we should think about the deliverances of contextual theology, so we will give it closer consideration in chapter 2.

in these regions should be a cause for concern. It seems increasingly clear that the disparity is not so much the result of academic theologians being “ahead of their time” but is instead the result of an overly restrictive vision of what contextual theology must entail.<sup>13</sup> Since the push for “contextual theologies” started in the 1970s, most of the proposals that have received widespread attention (with some important exceptions) regarded local culture as the primary source and norm for theological reflection, either purposefully or unintentionally diminishing the roles of Scripture and Christian tradition in the theological process. For decades, it was presumed that this was simply the cost of bringing theology into a shape that would be genuinely new and fitting for the emerging churches of the Majority World. To bring the Christian faith into the twenty-first century, it was thought, the global church needed new wineskins crafted with a new theological method, marked especially by a focus on the Spirit’s work outside the church—in local cultures and non-Christian religions. Meanwhile, theologians with a higher view of Scripture and Christian tradition generally rejected the work of contextual theology altogether, reckoning it to be an offshoot of the modern theological project incompatible with evangelical faith.

In recent years, however, the situation has begun to change. Evangelical scholars from the Majority World, as well as some from the West, have begun producing theology that takes local and global cultural elements more seriously without simultaneously demoting the authority of Scripture or the relevance of the Christian tradition. Slowly, evangelicals in the West have begun to recognize that their counterparts in the Majority World church have important perspectives on the good news that can enrich their own understandings of the faith. Evangelical leaders who affirm the supremacy of Scripture increasingly acknowledge that there is wisdom in a diversity and multitude of theological voices.<sup>14</sup> If these emerging efforts succeed, they will represent a substantial broadening of the vision for contextual theological engagement.

13. Indeed, rather than being “ahead of their time,” contextual theologies often lag behind the church as a whole. For example, Simon Chan rightly notes that most textbook treatments of Asian theology make it appear as if the discipline was frozen in the 1970s and 1980s (Chan, *Grassroots Asian Theology*, 25).

14. For a brief summary of these trends, see Stephen T. Pardue, “What Hath Wheaton to Do with Nairobi? Toward Catholic and Evangelical Theology,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 58, no. 4 (2015): 757–70.

This book seeks to introduce readers to these promising new developments and to give them a nudge forward by clarifying where evangelical approaches to contextual theology are likely to be particularly helpful. I hope to demonstrate how evangelical “contextual theologies” promise not only to breathe new life into the evangelical theological project but also to inject new energy into the broader project of contextual theological reflection, which has found itself in some ruts and dead ends in recent years.

To sum up, this book seeks to articulate some of the ways that evangelical theology ought to be influenced by the changing realities of the global church. This will mean addressing prevalent doubts about the prudence of incorporating culture into the theological process as well as outlining a biblical and theological framework that warrants and supports such efforts. Along the way, I will introduce readers to some of the most productive voices in this emerging movement, highlighting the material benefits that may accrue to evangelical theology when it embraces the Spirit-filled witness of the Majority World church as a substantive source and dialogue partner.

## Plan of the Book

The argument of the book unfolds in six chapters. The first chapter grapples with the reality that evangelical theologians have often neglected—or even rejected—calls to embrace the role of culture in theological reflection. Whereas Roman Catholic and mainline Protestant theologians long ago welcomed the development of contextual theologies, evangelicals have often been suspicious that such efforts will devolve into uncritical slavery to culture or that they are inevitably tied to a relativistic view of reality. While these objections often reflect mistaken assumptions about theological method and its relationship to culture, they nevertheless help clarify how an evangelical engagement with these issues will have a distinctive character, differing in key ways from alternative efforts arising from other parts of the church. So chapter 1 examines these objections and considers what we can learn from them.

Thankfully, this book does not have to sketch the evangelical approach to contextual theology *de novo*. Chapter 2 maps the various efforts already underway, delineating the many different tasks that are often grouped together under the category of “contextualization” or “contextual theology.” After getting the lay of the land, we will sketch a path forward by articulating five basic theses that seek to characterize a vision of contextual theological

reflection emerging from within the evangelical tradition. The first of these theses—that *evangelical contextual theologies must look to Scripture as their magisterial authority, even as they increase their appreciation for the crucial ministerial role of culture for the theological task*—is discussed in chapter 2.

Chapter 3 focuses on clarifying the role of culture by developing a second thesis: *evangelical contextual theologies must acknowledge culture as a material theological good, a gift from God designed for the benefit of the church*. An important but often neglected starting point here is to understand what it is that we mean by *culture* and how this concept fits into the biblical narrative and the doctrinal architecture of the Christian faith. To this end, chapter 3 briefly sums up several anthropological insights regarding the nature of culture as a concept before turning its focus to the argument that the Christian Scriptures authorize, and perhaps even mandate, a different understanding of culture and theology than evangelicals have generally taken for granted. By tracing the biblical authors' engagement with culture—from Babel to the vision of Revelation 7—and by considering the location of culture in the theological economy, this chapter makes the case that contextual theology is not merely a practical solution for the diversifying church but also a proper response to the redemptive activity of the triune God.

Any theology that takes culture seriously must grapple with the challenge of attending to locality and diversity while also focusing on what unifies Christian teaching. So after having established that culture is theologically important, chapter 4 wrestles with the question of how contextual theologies can remain sufficiently attentive to the “once-for-all” of the gospel while also taking advantage of the diverse cultural gifts God has given his people around the globe. In contrast to efforts to root contextual theology in either the phenomenon of globalization or the doctrines of the Trinity and incarnation, this chapter will point to the doctrine of the church. This is the third thesis of the book: *evangelical contextual theologies should look to the Christian doctrine of the church in order to coordinate the once-for-all of the gospel and the remarkably diverse expressions of the faith that emerge in the real world*. Crucially, this prevents the fracturing of theology into thousands of self-contained local theologies disengaged from Christian witness elsewhere.

Chapters 5 and 6 zero in on one attribute of the church that has special importance for making diversity an asset rather than a liability for contextual theologies: catholicity. From the earliest centuries, Christians confessed that all believers form a single, global household composed of citizens of every