

The Missionary Theology of D. T. Niles

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Introduction

Daniel Thambyrajah Niles (1908–1970)—a Ceylonese by birth and a Tamil by race—was a prominent evangelist, an acute mission theologian, and an ecumenist with deep local roots.

In his foreword to Niles's *Upon the Earth*, Lesslie Newbigin wrote:

Niles is an evangelist who is also a profound thinker, a theologian who can commend his Saviour effectively to others. . . . [And] his ministry is both local and ecumenical. Perhaps this is his most important qualification to speak to us at this moment. . . . What he says in an ecumenical setting has been tested again and again in the ordinary responsibilities of a local congregation.¹

A Methodist clergy, Niles considered himself first and foremost an evangelist-preacher:

“I am a preacher, and I am proud of the work to which I have committed my life. There is deep satisfaction in making Jesus Christ known and His Gospel understood.”² As Visser 't Hooft observed, “in a time when so many doubted that evangelism by the spoken word could still find a response, [Niles] just went ahead and used every opportunity for the proclamation of the Gospel.”³

Niles was deeply committed to the unity of the church both locally and worldwide. He represented the yearnings and aspirations of the so-called “younger churches” at major ecumenical gatherings, starting with the World Student Christian Federation (WSCF) Conference on Mission in Basel in 1935 and the Tambaram World Missionary Conference in 1938. He held

¹ Lesslie Newbigin, foreword to *Upon the Earth: The Mission of God and the Missionary Enterprise of the Church* by D. T. Niles (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1962), 8.

² D. T. Niles, *The Preacher's Calling to Be Servant* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1959), 11.

³ W. A. Visser 't Hooft, “D. T. Niles,” *International Review of Mission* 60, no. 237 (January 1971): 117.

influential ecumenical positions, at times concurrently. From 1953 to 1959 he was the Evangelism Secretary of the World Council of Churches (WCC), while also serving as chairperson of the WSCF. In 1957 he became the General Secretary of the East Asia Christian Conference, the first regional ecumenical body, which was intended not only to foster and express unity and fellowship among the churches in Asia but to contribute distinctively to the worldwide ecumenical movement. At the time of his death in 1970, he was one of the six presidents of the WCC.

D. T. Niles is probably best known for his often-quoted definition of evangelism: “It is one beggar telling another beggar where to get food.”⁴ Yet few seem to be aware how extensive the scope of his missionary theology was. Niles presented a comprehensive theology of mission, which was not formally academic but profoundly insightful. First, he sought to set mission in the context of the total mission of God. God is active and at work in the world, and invites the church to take part in God’s redeeming and restoring activity. The church is “never to work for” but “only allowed to work with” God whose mission is “to weave together into one the history of the nations until creation has become the new creation in its wholeness.”⁵

Niles, second, presented a holistic understanding of the missionary task of the church. The ultimate concern of the church is not with the individual soul but with the world. That “God so loved the world” implies that the Gospel is for the redemption of the world and not just of human souls. Thus, through mission, the church is called to transform not only individuals but the structures of society, that is, “men and women in the totality and complexity of their relationships.”⁶

⁴ D. T. Niles, *That They May Have Life* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1951), 96.

⁵ D. T. Niles, *The Message and Its Messengers* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1966), 49–50.

⁶ D. T. Niles, *The Power at Work Among Us: A Series of Lenten Meditations* (London: Epworth, 1968), 54.

Third, Niles understood missionary obedience an integral part of Christian discipleship. He urged all Christians to embrace the missionary implications of the Christian faith, since “to be a Christian is to be a member of a missionary community and to become a participant in the activity of a missionary God.”⁷ Indeed, discipleship and apostolate are inseparable.

I believe that Niles’s theology and practice of Christian mission and unity still have much to contribute to a greater understanding of the nature and calling of the church today, and that they deserve to be studied afresh. In this article I intend to examine Niles’s view of the church as a missionary community, his theology of evangelism, and his commitment to the unity and indigenization of the church.

Niles’s View of the Church as a Missionary Community

Niles’s missionary theology was unreservedly Trinitarian, based on his conviction that the church’s mission is to be anchored in the Triune God. Mission is, first, grounded in the belief that God is both living and active in history with a vital interest in human affairs. God’s continuing activity is determinative for the ultimate outcome and significance of both human history and mission of the church. “In God’s action,” asserted Niles, “the Church’s mission finds its authority, and in His activity its compulsion.”⁸

Also, for Niles, “‘who Jesus is’ is what must determine the work we do and the way in which we must do it.”⁹ As Schradig noted, he “had a profound commitment to the Christ event, was captured by it, and found it the paradigm by which all of life was to be explained.”¹⁰ Jesus’ being risen takes on a special significance for the Christian faith as well as for mission. Because

⁷ Niles, *Upon the Earth*, 10–11.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 44.

⁹ D. T. Niles, *Who Is This Jesus?* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1968), 9.

¹⁰ Paul E. Schradig, “D.T. Niles: Ecumenical Evangelical,” *Christian Advocate*, April 29, 1971, p. 14.

Jesus is risen, he meets everyone as his or her contemporary. Therefore “it is not the meaning of Jesus Christ which must be stated in contemporary terms; Jesus himself, in his concreteness, must be seen as contemporary.”¹¹ In mission the church is invited to participate in his continuing ministry.

For Niles, both Christian discipleship and mission are inseparably related to the experience of the Holy Spirit. The two questions—“Do you believe in Jesus Christ?” and “Have you received the Holy Spirit?”—are to go hand in hand. It is the Holy Spirit who enables believers to respond and commit to Jesus’ call to follow him in his ministry to the world, and who makes possible the very mission of the church. The church is a community created and indwelt by the Holy Spirit, whose mission is “a mission within the mission of the Holy Spirit.”¹² The experience of the Holy Spirit takes place where the Spirit blows, where the church is called to join in with the Spirit encountering and engaging the world.

It is noteworthy that Niles consistently held in creative tension the church as an instrument and the church as a community of a new order. On the one hand, the church exists by mission or as the instrument of mission. On the other hand, the church is not just a means to an end but an eschatological community with distinctive values and practices. To put it in the words of Newbigin, “it is precisely because [the church] is not *merely* instrumental that she can be instrumental.”¹³

Niles understood God’s redemptive work as twofold: “[God’s] inclusive purpose to bring all into a unity in Christ; and . . . his exclusive purpose to create a community who will be the

¹¹ Niles, *Who Is This Jesus?*, 111.

¹² Niles, *Upon the Earth*, 44, 70.

¹³ Lesslie Newbigin, *The Household of God: Lectures on the Nature of the Church* (London: SCM, 1953), 169. Italics in original.

demonstration of this unity and evidence of Christ's reconciling power."¹⁴ God's universal purpose for the whole of creation and particular election of the church do not contradict each other, although the particular is always to be at the service of the universal.

In *Upon the Earth*, presenting his most comprehensive theology of mission, Niles reflected on the nature of the church's mission. The church is, first, "to be the people of God" that demonstrate the power of the Gospel and mediate God's presence to the world. The church is, second, "to be the people of God everywhere—in every situation, in every land and nation, in all areas of life." Thus the mission of the church is to go to the ends of the earth and sow the seed of the Gospel. Third, the church is "to be the people of God on a journey," a pilgrim people who do not ever settle down. Since they do not belong where they are, and since they hold distinct values different from those of settlers, they could "exert a peculiar pressure on the forms of common life."¹⁵

Niles fully appreciated the eschatological nature of the church. The promised end is already here, and it is the calling of the church to point to and live out the future that is already happening. Yet the end is not only grounded in what Jesus has accomplished through his death but also depends on what he will accomplish when he comes again. According to Niles, the church "anchors human history to these two events"—Jesus' death and his coming—witnessing to the historical centrality of the past event and to the certainty of the future event.¹⁶ In this between the times is found the sphere of the church's mission.

For Niles, the church is "part of the Gospel itself," being part of what God has done for the world.¹⁷ As part of the Gospel, the church's mission cannot be disconnected from its

¹⁴ Niles, *Who Is This Jesus?*, 144.

¹⁵ Niles, *Upon the Earth*, 73–79.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 114.

¹⁷ Niles, *They May Have Life*, 66, 69.

corporate life: “The message will carry no conviction unless it is being proved in the lives of those who bear the Name that is being declared.”¹⁸ Mission is feasible and efficacious only when the church becomes “a convincing laboratory experiment of the transforming and creative power of Christianity.”¹⁹

In *Sir, We Would See Jesus*, a study on evangelism, Niles portrayed the church “as the place where the Gospel happens.”²⁰ To illustrate the costliness of letting the Gospel happen, Niles went on to depict the kind of community the church is supposed to be. In a country like Sri Lanka where Christians are a minority, conversion implies the breaking up of the social cohesion, with new converts often having to leave their home, family members, or land for the sake of the Gospel. The church is to be a new fellowship or social order that makes up to them what they have sacrificed.

Although the church was a major concern in Niles’s missionary theology, he was opposed to the church-centered approach to mission. He believed that the true nature and calling of the church could be discerned only from the perspective of the Kingdom of God. He approvingly quoted Hoekendijk who was critical of a church-centered orientation of mission:

Its whole horizon is completely filled by the Church. The missionary now hardly leaves the ecclesiastical sphere. He tries to define his whole surrounding world in ecclesiological categories. The world has almost ceased to be the world and is now conceived of as a sort of ecclesiastical training ground. The Kingdom is either confined within the bounds of the Church or else it has become something like an eschatological lightening on the far horizon.²¹

The perception of the world in relation to the church is an element of great import that

¹⁸ Niles, *Upon the Earth*, 197.

¹⁹ Rufus M. Jones, “Secular Civilization and the Christian Task,” in *The Christian Life and Message in Relation to Non-Christian Systems of Thought and Life*, vol. 1, *Report of the Jerusalem Meeting of the International Missionary Council* (London: Oxford University Press, 1928), 328, quoted in D. T. Niles, *Sir, We Would See Jesus* (London: SCM, 1938), 20.

²⁰ Niles, *Sir, We Would See Jesus*, 85.

²¹ J. C. Hoekendijk, “The Church in Missionary Thinking,” *International Review of Mission* 41, no. 163 (July 1952): 324, quoted in Niles, *Upon the Earth*, 22.

cannot be overlooked in an integral ecclesiology, as the church's view of the world significantly affects its vision of mission. "The church's life can be understood," said Niles, "only in relation to the world to which it is sent and in which it is set."²² To stress that the world is already within the redeeming work and rule of Christ, he turned to one of Charles Wesley's hymns:

The world He suffered to redeem;
For all He hath the atonement made;
For those that will not come to Him
The ransom of His life was paid.²³

For Niles, to be the people of God is to enter fully into the life of the world that is already "saved." He thus stated:

When the church ceases to be concerned with the world, then it ceases to hear God speak to it; for God's conversation with the church is a conversation about the world, and the church must be willing to converse about the world if it is to converse with God. It is the world which is the direct object of God's action. He made it. He loved it. He saved it. He will judge it through Jesus Christ.²⁴

Niles warned churches of the danger of isolating themselves from their environment, interested only in the religious aspect of life. With regard to the churches in Sri Lanka, he considered ghettoism, rather than syncretism, their most serious temptation.²⁵ Missionaries or mission agencies "concerned exclusively with the Church in the missionary land rather than with the land itself" would not be able to discern the scope of God's mission.²⁶ The mission of the church is to make sure that every furrow of human life, where Jesus is involved, is penetrated by the Christian presence.

Niles's Theology of Evangelism

²² Niles, *Upon the Earth*, 10.

²³ *Ibid.*, 235. See also D. T. Niles, *The Context in Which We Preach* (Geneva: John Knox House Association, 1956), 12–13.

²⁴ D. T. Niles, "Summons at Midnight," *Christian Century* 71 (1954): 1038. See also D. T. Niles, "How to Prepare to Lead Bible Study," *Student World* 49 (1956): 83.

²⁵ Niles, *Upon the Earth*, 147.

²⁶ Niles, *They May Have Life*, 75.

At the heart of Niles's missionary theology was evangelism. He believed that evangelism is "being a Christian" and "a way of the church's life,"²⁷ and that "evangelistic calling . . . undergirds every Christian vocation."²⁸

One's understanding of the Gospel decidedly shapes and affects his or her view of evangelism and mission. Defining the Gospel, Niles laid great stress on God's redeeming activity: "The Gospel is that God . . . has come to man in Jesus Christ. The issue is . . . concerning God's activity: and, supremely, his action in the incarnation."²⁹ Thus "the Christian Gospel is not that 'God is love' but that 'God so loved.'"³⁰ Rooted in God's gracious initiative, the Gospel calls for "a specific commitment to a particular event and person" rather than "some general response to the requirements of religion or morality."³¹

Niles's understanding of Christian witness was based on his Wesleyan conviction that God's saving activity precedes any human evangelistic activity. The evangelist needs to be acutely aware that "God is previous to him in the life of the person whom he is seeking to win for the Gospel, and also previous to him in whatever area of life he is seeking to make the Gospel effective."³² Niles was thus reluctant to use the term "non-Christian" toward anyone because it suggests as if the person were outside the circle whose center is Jesus Christ. He rather believed that "those whom we would seek to win are already encompassed by him."³³

Niles defined sin as human refusal to face God where God has come to meet humans, that is, "in Jesus Christ." A crucial step in the whole evangelistic process then is "to bring men to

²⁷ Ibid., 33, 82.

²⁸ Niles, *Preacher's Calling*, 13.

²⁹ Niles, *We Know in Part*, 63

³⁰ D. T. Niles, *The World Mission Looks Ahead* (New York: Student Volunteer Movement, 1939), 31.

³¹ D. T. Niles, "The Christian Claim for the Finality of Christ," in *The Finality of Christ*, ed. Dow Kirkpatrick (Nashville: Abingdon, 1966), 16.

³² Niles, *Upon the Earth*, 236.

³³ Niles, *Message and Messengers*, 53.

Jesus Christ . . . as the place and person where God has willed to meet them.”³⁴ The evangelist ultimately should leave the hearer with Jesus. If the evangelist “remains in the picture then the situation is not one of evangelism but of proselytism.”³⁵

Niles argued that people have difficulty meeting Jesus, because they fail to recognize him. Thus “the task of the Christian mission . . . is to help people to learn how to recognize Jesus.”³⁶ People learn to recognize Jesus, first, by studying the Gospels. Rather than sharing Jesus out of their own experience, Christian witnesses are to point others to the Gospels so that they could see what Jesus was like in the flesh. Niles insisted that “until we can bring back into the Church a renewed study of the Gospels, the Church will be unable to fulfil its mission.”³⁷

The second way to help people recognize the person of Jesus is through the community of faith that manifests him in its life-together. The way to faith in Jesus is through “a crashing conviction wrought out by personal confrontation with the risen Christ, a confrontation mediated within the ongoing life and testimony of the Christian community.”³⁸

For Niles, evangelism is definitely a word event: “the proclamation of an event and an invitation to an encounter”—the proclamation of God’s event in Christ that has changed the whole fabric of the universe and an invitation to an encounter with the risen Christ who is here as our contemporary.³⁹ Evangelism is, however, not solely verbal, as demonstrated in Jesus’ incarnation—the paradigmatic event of evangelism—in which the Word became flesh. As Niles rightly claimed, “The Christian Gospel is the Word become flesh. This is more than and other

³⁴ Niles, *They May Have Life*, 84. See also D. T. Niles, *The Preacher’s Task and the Stone of Stumbling* (New York: Harper & Row, 1958), 15.

³⁵ Niles, *Upon the Earth*, 104.

³⁶ D. T. Niles, “The Triune God, Mission, and Unity,” *Student World* 54 (1961): 43.

³⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸ Niles, *We Know in Part*, 85-86.

³⁹ Niles, *They May Have Life*, 33.

than the Word become speech.”⁴⁰ The evangelistic thrust of the Gospel is lost when it is not lived by those who proclaim it. Yet Niles stressed that ultimately the Gospel has to be spoken, and that “witness by word to Jesus Christ is an inescapable part of Christian obedience” as “the climatic deed.”⁴¹ Deeds cannot take the place of words because the Gospel that the evangelist preaches is greater than and other than any human life.

It was Niles’s Wesleyan contribution to the understanding of evangelism that he linked it to holiness. He believed that, in true evangelism, it is not that we take Jesus into someone’s life, but that Jesus takes us into someone’s life. It is necessary for Christian witnesses to recognize that they themselves are gifts of God’s love. For Niles, the process of sanctification is inseparably related to believers’ becoming gifts worthy of Jesus’ love: “We are made holy in order that we may be worthy to be given as gifts by him who loves.”⁴² “The call to apostleship is linked to the call to sainthood,” stated Niles, “and . . . we shall become saints only through the discipline involved in being true apostles.”⁴³

Niles underlined the significance of “context” in evangelism, since people could hear the Gospel “only in relation to [their] geographical, linguistic, social and general cultural realities.”⁴⁴ Christ needs to be presented in terms not only of “what” the person is in relation to God’s prior saving activity and the present working of the Holy Spirit, but in terms of “where” the person is with regard to the particular human context. Niles provided this fitting illustration:

If you are trying to board a moving tram or a moving train, you have to run alongside it till, more or less, you are running in the same direction at the same speed and then board. People are moving trains. An evangelist who simply tries to board by a perpendicular jump will only break his neck. We have to learn how to run alongside people before we

⁴⁰ Ibid., 96.

⁴¹ Niles, *Upon the Earth*, 125–26.

⁴² D. T. Niles, “The Evangelistic Situation,” *Union Seminary Quarterly Review* 15 (1960): 114. See also Niles, “Triune God,” 41–42.

⁴³ Niles, *They May Have Life*, 89. Niles also said, “Holy living is simply the natural concomitant of a witnessing life” (*Upon the Earth*, 59).

⁴⁴ Niles, *Upon the Earth*, 247.

are ready to make evangelistic connection.⁴⁵

Niles also called attention to the social and political dimensions of the evangelistic witness. The Gospel addresses not only the individual and personal needs but also the “sin of the world . . . lodged in social structures.”⁴⁶ Thus it is also the calling of the evangelist to see to it that the seed of the Gospel is sown into every furrow of human life—family, class, race, occupation, language, and government. For Niles, evangelism involved “bring[ing] to bear the truths of the Gospel on the torments of the world.”⁴⁷

Niles was criticized for advocating universalism, in particular after the publication of *Upon the Earth*, in which he wrote that “in speaking about salvation, the thirst of the Christian hope is to include ‘all.’”⁴⁸ He turned to one of the hymns by Charles Wesley to support his own view: “‘So wide,’ said Charles Wesley speaking of God’s grace, ‘so wide it never passed by one, or it had passed by me.’”⁴⁹ The Gospel is Gospel because it is meant for all and nobody is excluded.

On the one hand, Niles was not hesitant to state that “there is only one Saviour, Jesus Christ . . . and all who are saved will be saved by Him.”⁵⁰ For the whole of humanity God has provided a particular place of reconciliation—“in Christ Jesus” whose act of atonement forms a determining reality. On the other hand, however, he refused to engage in speculation about the ultimate salvation of others, since no one could “decide how and in what guise Jesus comes to men and claims their acceptance.”⁵¹ Hwa Yung suggested that Niles wanted to “maintain a

⁴⁵ Niles, “Evangelistic Situation,” 113.

⁴⁶ Niles, *Upon the Earth*, 124–25.

⁴⁷ Niles, “Summons,” 1038.

⁴⁸ Niles, *Upon the Earth*, 71.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 46.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 72.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 73.

reverent agnosticism about the question of the eternal destiny of each person.”⁵²

Obviously, Niles sought to hold together both the universality of God’s salvific intention and the necessity of human response:

Salvation is indeed God’s possibility, but it also remains man’s responsibility; and there is no way of so fusing these two truths together as either to minimize man’s responsibility or limit God’s possibility. With God all things are possible, but for man damnation remains a possibility also.⁵³

For Niles, the tension between salvation as God’s possibility and salvation as human responsibility in turn should urge the church to take its missional calling ever more urgently:

The New Testament does not allow us to say either Yes or No to the question: “Will all . . . be saved?” and by preventing us from doing this it forces on us the question; “Will you fulfill your share of the task to which God has called you in the Church—the task of making Jesus known and loved, confessed and obeyed, by all . . . in every area of life?”⁵⁴

Niles stressed that judgment or damnation is to be set within the context of, rather than apart from, the redeeming activity of God in Jesus. Judgment is an activity of God and not that of the church. He thus stated: “The issue of salvation is an issue for the evangelist, but the issue of damnation is not in our hands. The issues of salvation and damnation are in the hands of our Lord alone.”⁵⁵

Niles’s Commitment to the Unity and Indigenization of the Church

As Harold de Soysa, the first Ceylonese Bishop of Colombo, put it, Niles was “passionately convinced of the need for unity as an act of obedience to which God was calling the Church of [his] generation, for the sake of the most adequate fulfilment of its mission to the world.”⁵⁶ It was Niles’s profound conviction that the mission of the church is indivisible from its

⁵² Hwa Yung, *Mangoes or Bananas? The Quest for an Authentic Asian Christian Theology* (Oxford: Regnum, 1997), 154. Yung called Niles’ position a soft universalist.

⁵³ Niles, *Upon the Earth*, 95.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 96.

⁵⁵ Niles, “Evangelistic Situation,” 115.

⁵⁶ Harold de Soysa, “Memorial Sermon for D. T. Niles, 1908–1970,” *Ecumenical Review* 22, no. 4 (October 1970):

unity. He was mindful of the missionary origins of the ecumenical movement, and regarded it as “God’s call to the Churches to rediscover their essential togetherness and to seek nourishment from one another” while engaging in mission.⁵⁷

Unity is, however, not merely for the sake of enhancing the church’s missional credibility and effectiveness, but for the sake of embodying and exemplifying a community that lives by the reconciliation wrought in Christ. Unity is at the heart of the church’s very being, as it reflects and demonstrates the true nature of the reconciliation proclaimed in mission. Niles thus stated: “The Church as ‘mission’ may convert, but where the call to unity is not heeded the Church refuses its mission to be the place where the new humanity is fashioned and the new creation is begun.”⁵⁸

Niles was fully aware that the unity of the church is never a human achievement, and that the church’s call is not to create but to make visible a unity that already exists. He aligned himself with what was known as the Lund Principle that called for the churches to “act together in all matters except those in which deep differences of conviction compel them to act separately.”⁵⁹ Coining the term “realized ecumenism,” he urged churches to seek to find a particular form in history for the unity that is already a given reality as God’s gift. What is crucial in ecumenical endeavors is to determine and put to the test most suitable forms through which the unity already given and realized could be expressed.

Finding a way to live together by unity and taking the responsible risk of sharing in each other’s life should precede complete agreement on all matters of union. The differences should not be used as an excuse for not working and moving forward with the agreements already reached: “We must act on as many matters as possible as if we were a united Church. This means

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⁵⁷ Niles, *Upon the Earth*, 138.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 207.

⁵⁹ Oliver S. Tomkins, ed., *The Third World Conference on Faith and Order* (London: SCM, 1953), 16.

that our present unity becomes the basis of our action.”⁶⁰ Niles pointed to the experience of the Church of South India to stress the importance of seeking to live by the realized unity: “Our friends in the Church of South India have often testified among us that they have understood and entered into each other’s heritage more within five years of common life than within twenty-nine years of negotiation.”⁶¹

Niles considered it most important for the churches to understand and express unity at the regional and local congregational levels, although without losing the sight of its belonging to the church universal. He shared a story to illustrate the mutual correlation between mission and unity at the local level:

A bishop of the Church of South India wrote to an American mission board for assistance in a new youth program. . . . A letter came back from the board secretary asking, “What do the other churches in the area think about this project?” Such a question had never been asked before. But behind the asking of this question was a true conviction that the mission of the Church was indivisible and that the churches must decide together not only what must be done together, but also what must be done separately.⁶²

Niles called attention to the fact that the younger churches were more willing to cross denominational boundaries than the missionary-sending churches of the West. He implored the Western missionaries not to fracture the unity among the younger churches:

Take Ceylon: the church in Ceylon is not simply the result of adding together the Methodists, the Anglicans and the Baptists. We are one community of Christians in Ceylon. I want to plead with those of you who come from the West not to forget that we have no other unity. In the West you have a unity as American people, for instance, whose culture is rooted in a Christian heritage. The only unity we have is the unity of being Christians. Please do not come and fragment our unity because you don’t understand it. . . . Our unity is partial and many of us cannot go further because it is uncharted sea, but at least when we do take tentative steps ahead, do not hamper us simply because you do not understand the pattern.⁶³

⁶⁰ D. T. Niles, “Some Binding Principles in Missionary Strategy,” *Student World* 48 (1955): 27. See also Niles, *Upon the Earth*, 36; and Niles, *Message and Messengers*, 38–39.

⁶¹ D. T. Niles, “The Church’s Call to Mission and Unity,” *Ecumenical Review* 5, no. 3 (April 1953): 247.

⁶² Niles, *Message and Messengers*, 55–56.

⁶³ Niles, “Binding Principles,” 32.

With regard to indigenization, Niles believed that “Christianity needs to be expressed in life-situations, it must be a matter of life-expression.”⁶⁴ In light of the prevailing Westernity of the church even in the East, he called the younger churches to seek to attain their self-hood. One way for the church to find and be its true self is to “learn to offer its worship in forms most natural to itself.”⁶⁵ Even after “drink[ing] deep at western fountains of music and poetry,” said Niles, “there is still a thirst which only our mother’s milk can satisfy.”⁶⁶ Such longing led him to be involved in publishing *The East Asia Christian Conference Hymnal* in 1963. Serving as its general editor, he wrote the words for forty-five entries.

Niles pointed to the danger for the younger churches to be detached from the aspirations and struggles of their nation. It is crucial to let the church be the church in its location, the church for the nation. In the midst of the emergence of post-colonial nations in Asia, he urged the church to be actively involved in nation-building:

Indeed, it should be part of a church’s concern that the nation which it is set to serve should live in freedom. The self-hood of a nation is witnessed to by the authenticity of its culture, its sense of self-conscious identity, and the freedom with which it is able to share in the concert of the nations. That a nation attains this self-hood is part of the requirements for a church’s full discharge of its mission in and to that nation.”⁶⁷

It should be noted that Niles recognized and cautioned against the temptation to “to slip from a concern to build a church for the nation into a desire to build a church of the nation”; however, he also knew well that, when such caution came from the churches of the West, it could have been motivated by their concern about losing influence over the younger churches.⁶⁸

The images that Niles frequently employed to illustrate his understanding of

⁶⁴ D. T. Niles in *The Life of the Church*, vol. 4, *The Madras Series* (New York: International Missionary Council, 1939), 262.

⁶⁵ Niles, *Upon the Earth*, 141.

⁶⁶ Niles, *Sir, We Would See Jesus*, 100.

⁶⁷ Niles, *Upon the Earth*, 143.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 256.

indigenization were those of seed and plant. The Gospel is like a seed and Christianity the plant. Christianity in each country is to be indigenous to its own soil, as the plant bears the marks of both the seed and the soil. Niles stated: “It is inevitable that the missionary should bring a pot plant, the Christianity of his own culture; it is essential that he allow the pot to be broken and the plant to be rooted in the soil of the country to which he goes.”⁶⁹

Niles was, however, also keenly aware of the tension between the church and culture as the impact of the Gospel is not only affirming, but also judging, of all cultures. It is crucial for the church to know of its own identity and calling in order not to become just part of, but to defend itself against, its environment. “If there is a weakening of the theological understanding of the Church,” wrote Niles, “then indigenization can become a real betrayal.”⁷⁰

It is noteworthy that Niles drew attention to a close correlation between the unity and indigenization of the younger churches. He argued that the churches “in India and Ceylon cannot conceive of an indigenous Church with branches which are not in full fellowship one with another.”⁷¹ As long as the churches in the East remain divided as “replicas of the denominational Churches in the West” with the denominational distinctions accepted as fundamental differences, they would be too shackled to become fully native to their cultural and religious environments and indigenous in their life and expression.⁷²

The relationship between autonomy and self-support constitutes one of the thorniest issues in indigenization. Although Niles did not press self-support as an essential condition for autonomy, he thought that “the one way for a church to grow in autonomy will be by complete

⁶⁹ Niles, *They May Have Life*, 80–81.

⁷⁰ D. T. Niles, “Christianity in a Non-Christian Environment,” *Student World* 47 (1954): 261.

⁷¹ Niles, *Sir, We Would See Jesus*, 96.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 93–95.

self-support with respect to the financial cost of its workers.”⁷³ To gain self-support, however, it would be necessary for the younger churches to forgo the financial structure replicating that of the West and to find a structure reflecting the realities of their own financial setting.⁷⁴

Another significant way for the younger churches to mature in autonomy is to commit to, and participate fully in, the missionary movement. The church’s self-hood and its missionary obligation cannot be separated from one another. Niles encouraged them to organize their own mission board, which will give each church “a permanent sense of responsibility towards the task of missions.”⁷⁵ He insisted that the younger churches not reproduce the denominational pattern of the older churches in mission but devise its own leadership and pastoral structure so as to be faithful and relevant to their location of mission.

Niles stated that ultimately indigenization should be considered from the viewpoint of the church’s evangelistic ministry:

It is only in so far as the Church is worried about its evangelistic inefficiency that it will strive to become indigenous. Union is for strength in the evangelistic task. Nationalisation is for homeliness in the evangelistic message. Independence is for freedom in the evangelistic approach.⁷⁶

Conclusion

As shown in this essay, D. T. Niles was a significant mission theologian and ecumenist whose writings and ministries reflected a striking breadth and comprehensiveness of missional concerns and interests. He dialectically held in creative tension seemingly opposing elements in the life and mission of the church. His personal commitment to evangelism and church unity with deep local roots added authenticity to his missionary theology.

⁷³ Niles, *Upon the Earth*, 183.

⁷⁴ Niles, *Message and Messengers*, 58.

⁷⁵ Niles, *Upon the Earth*, 191.

⁷⁶ Niles, *Sir, We Would See Jesus*, 106–7.

Niles was certainly influenced by some of the leading theologians and ecumenists of his generation—including Karl Barth, Pierre Maury, and W. A. Vissert 't Hooft. The most prominent influence was probably Karl Barth whose dialectical theology helped him view God's redeeming "activity" as the central message of the Gospel and the foundation for the church's mission.⁷⁷ Since the Gospel concerns the action of God, and not ideas about God, it is to be proclaimed and even demonstrated than to be taught. As Niles rightly put it, the Gospel is, "in its essence, an event to be declared," an event that is "of decisive significance" for all and for all time.⁷⁸

Niles's Wesleyan heritage also profoundly shaped the framework of his theology of mission.⁷⁹ Most importantly, he anchored his theology of evangelism in "the previousness" of the act of God in Jesus. Since God's climactic intervention thorough Jesus in human affairs has affected the whole of humanity, everyone has already been encompassed by God's reconciling work and no one is outside the circle of Jesus. Christian witnesses are to be mindful that the person they encounter with the Gospel is already within God's saving ministry or the saving facts of the Gospel. The evangelist's calling is then to stand alongside and point the person to Christ as one beggar telling another beggar.

Manifest in Niles's mission theology was a comprehensive and integral understanding of the church's mission that embraced personal, ecclesial, and social transformations. He was convinced that, since the culmination of God's purpose is the redemption of the whole of

⁷⁷ Christopher L. Furtado, *The Contribution of Dr. D. T. Niles to the Church Universal and Local* (Madras: Christian Literature Society, 1978), 27.

⁷⁸ D. T. Niles in *Why We Must Speak: A Discussion on Evangelism at the Third Assembly of the WCC, New Delhi 1961* (Geneva: WCC, 1962), 16.

⁷⁹ W. Dayalan Niles, D. T. Niles's son, thought that "his overall frame of reference [was] Methodist" ("Search for Community: A Preliminary Explanation of the Theology of Daniel T. Niles" [paper presented at the Oxford Institute of Methodist Theological Studies, Oxford, July 1977], quoted in Creighton Lacy, "The Legacy of D. T. Niles," *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 8, vol. 4 [October 1984]: 175).

creation, the church is to concern itself not just with individual souls but with the totality of God's world and to "take serious account of the tides and movements of history."⁸⁰ A faithful Wesleyan, Niles also understood the church's holiness bound up with its missionary calling: "The Church is holy because it is the instrument of God's mission to the world. . . . Let a Church cease to be missionary and it ceases to be holy."⁸¹ The church is constantly renewed only when it faithfully carries out its missionary calling.

Through his ministry Niles agonized over "the paradox that the church is indivisible and that yet it is divided,"⁸² and lamented the continued distortion of the church's mission due to its division. His contribution to the unity of the church was most visible in his efforts to interweave both local and worldwide concerns and expressions of ecumenism. Niles's commitment to remain rooted in the Christian community in Jaffna even in the midst of carrying on worldwide ecumenical and evangelistic responsibilities was significant. It was based on his conviction that churches in every nation should take root in their own soil and become native to their own environment. Niles stressed that the church is to be "the church in a particular time, in a particular place, committed to the tasks in which the Lord is engaged."⁸³ He longed for that eschatological multicultural vision of Revelation in which the particular riches of the nations are brought into the City of God.

Niles's reservations regarding worldwide denominationalism could shed some light on the current United Methodist debate on its worldwide connection. He was concerned that it could deter churches from seeking local and regional unity. He was thus not enthusiastic about World Methodism "as a theological alternative to Methodists in a particular country uniting in one

⁸⁰ Niles, *Upon the Earth*, 138.

⁸¹ Niles, *They May Have Life*, 75.

⁸² D. T. Niles, "Church Union in North India, Pakistan and Ceylon," *Ecumenical Review* 14, no. 3 (April 1962): 307.

⁸³ D. T. Niles, "What is the Church for?," *Princeton Seminary Bulletin* 58, no. 3 (June 1965): 7.

church with their fellow Christians.”⁸⁴ For Niles, the church was supposed to have two foci—Jesus Christ and its particular context—and the second focus was to “be determined by the locality—the actual tasks and actual people.”⁸⁵

Niles was prophetic when he said, “the next crucial struggle in the mission of the Church is not in Africa or Asia but in Europe and North America.”⁸⁶ Yet he was not so prophetic as to foresee the rise of non-Western Christianity as a missionary-sending force. Niles thought that, unless the impact of the Gospel could become more compelling in the West, the whole missionary endeavors would be weakened. It has, however, proved not to be the case.

⁸⁴ Niles, *Message and Messengers*, 45. Niles was deeply disappointed when the Methodist Church in Ceylon voted against accepting the Proposed Scheme for Church Union in Ceylon.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 54.

⁸⁶ Niles, *Upon the Earth*, 195.