D. T. Niles, the Church, and the Fellowship of the Spirit

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Abstract

By the time of his death, Daniel Thambyrajah Niles (1908–1970) was among the most well-known Christian leaders in the world. Niles, a Methodist born in Ceylon (later, Sri Lanka), quickly rose to national and international prominence through his work locally, nationally, and internationally. Niles’s theology, which reflects aspects of both Wesleyanism and Barthianism, emerges from a pneumatological vision of the church as the family of God. Although he was a prominent figure in the global ecumenical movement, Niles openly criticized Western cultural practices that permeated Christian churches and missionary work in the middle of the twentieth century. He contended against the widespread distrust of majority world churches and their local leadership. Niles maintained that the Holy Spirit calls Christian churches to participate in matters of national concern and to offer visible witness to the nations through the proclamation of the gospel.

Introduction

Lesslie Newbigin recommended the theology of D. T. Niles (1908–1970) as one springing from distinctly local and ecumenical sources of reflection: “an evangelist who is also a profound thinker, a theologian who can commend his
Saviour effectively to others . . . He knows what he is talking about and he has earned the right, as few men have, to be heard.”¹ Recognized as a skillful thinker, writer, evangelist, and ecumenical leader throughout much of the world by the middle of the twentieth century, Niles developed a vision of contextual theology for Sri Lanka and beyond that uniquely bridged Western and Eastern religious concerns. Formative influences on his personal development included not only Tamil culture, Buddhism, and Hinduism, but also an amalgamation of “Methodist missionary presence, Charles Wesley’s hymns, and E. Stanley Jones’ theology and his Ashram movement.”²

Those who do not recognize D. T. Niles’s name will certainly appreciate his influence on a pivotal North American: Martin Luther King, Jr., who was indebted to Niles in the formation of one of his most famous sermons: “A Knock at Midnight.” The outline of “A Knock at Midnight” (1958) was written on King’s copy of Niles’s address on “Evangelism,” presented before the World Council of Churches at Evanston, Illinois in 1954. In that address, Niles took up the parable of the neighbor, stating that “[t]here are those who are knocking at the door of the Church; and they are not merely the hungry, the homeless, the refugee, the displaced person, the outcast; there are at the Church’s door, also, every type of community—nations, races, classes, political groupings—knocking for different reasons. Some are asking for bread, others simply ask what kind of people live in this house in which a light shines at midnight, and still others come just to shake their fists in the faces of those who keep a light burning but have no bread.”³ Just months after King’s assassination, it was Niles who was called upon to take King’s place as the opening speaker at the 1968 assembly of the World Council of Churches at Uppsala, Sweden. Remarkably, despite his status as the “best known non-Western [Methodist] theologian of the mid-twentieth century,”⁴ Niles’s rich, Spirit-ecclesiology has

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² Thomas A. Langford, Practical Divinity: Theology in the Wesleyan Tradition, vol. 1 (Nashville: Abingdon, 1983), 238. Niles mentions the work of the ashrams in The Power at Work Among Us: “In the ashram we have in Ceylon, everyone is a vegetarian, because the ashram is open to anyone who wants to come, and many Hindus who are vegetarians will come . . .” (84) (cf. “The Evangelistic Situation, 114–15).⁵
⁴ Langford, Practical Divinity, 238. Compare these comments to Newbigin’s note that Niles “was not, and did not pretend to be, a great theologian, but he had immensely fruitful
been widely overlooked in the years after his death. Who was this figure, once so well known, today largely forgotten? What did he have to say about the Spirit and the church that Christians might want to recover in Wesleyan theology today?

Daniel Thambryrajah Niles was born on May 4, 1908 in Tellipalai, Sri Lanka. Niles’s paternal great-grandfather and maternal great-great-grandfather were the first two converts from Hinduism of the American Mission in Jaffna; his grandfather, with whom he lived until he was eight years old, was a noted Methodist pastor and poet; his father a lawyer of some distinction. As a Ceylon Tamil and a Christian, Niles belonged to two minority populations throughout his life: Ceylon Tamils totaled 12% and Christians just under 8% of Sri Lanka’s population, respectively. “D.T.,” as friends and associates alike called Niles, studied in Jaffna and later pursued theology in Bangalore between

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theological and personal friendships with most of the leading thinkers of the time, and these enriched his writing and speaking” (Lesslie Newbigin, “Niles, Daniel Thambryrajah,” in Dictionary of the Ecumenical Movement [Geneva and Grand Rapids: WCC and Eerdmans, 1991], 73).

The most thorough examination of Niles’s life and influence is Christopher L. Furtado, The Contribution of Dr. D. T. Niles to the Church Universal and Local (Madras: Christian Literature Society, 1978). Furtado’s interpretation focuses on the centrality of Jesus Christ and the influence of Karl Barth, but does offer some helpful comments on Niles’s interest in the Holy Spirit (132–33). He also mentions the “extravagant” claim of J. R. Fleming, “designating the whole theology of Niles as ‘eine Theologie des Heiligen Geistes’” (133n.520); see also, Glen Wenger Snowden, “The Relationship of Christianity to Non-Christian Religions in the Theologies of Daniel T. Niles and Paul Tillich” (Ph.D. diss, Boston University, 1969).

Sri Lanka, known in Niles’s lifetime as Ceylon, became an independent republic in May 1972 (British colony from 1802, British dominion from 1948, and socialist republic from 1972). I will use both Ceylon and Sri Lanka throughout this chapter, especially in cases of historical significance.


In 1971, ethno-linguistic divisions in Sri Lanka included 72% Sinhalese, 12.6% Ceylon Tamil, and 5.1% Indian Tamil. Religious divisions that same year include 67.4% Buddhist, 17.6% Hindu, 7.9% (1,086,000) Christians, and 7.1% Muslims (David B. Barrett, George T. Kurian, and Todd M. Johnson, eds. World Christian Encyclopedia, second ed. [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001], 695–96).
1929 and 1933. By 1936, Niles was ordained to ministry in the Methodist Church, serving first as a district evangelist and, in the following decade, a local church pastor (from 1946). His rapid rise to leadership positions before reaching his thirtieth birthday indicates something of his unique gifts. By 1938, Niles had already served as national secretary of the Student Christian Movement (from 1933) and a key speaker at the International Missionary Council at Tambaram, Madras (1938). Soon after, he worked as evangelism secretary for the world Y.M.C.A. (1939–40) and head of the National Christian Council of Ceylon (1941–45). One North American missionary account from November 1945 attests to the powerful reputation Niles quickly accrued in the region:

I want to tell you about D. T. Niles. He is about 37 and looks 25. Quite handsome, as most Tamils. He has done various church work but never had a pastorate until a couple of years ago[,] his friends . . . told him he needed such experience so he took a church and has built it up tremendously. But he is so good that he is always getting outside jobs. Perhaps you have heard that this past summer there was a big international Christian conference in Oslo. Well, D. T. Niles delivered the keynote address there . . . The International YMCA and the World Council of Churches are going to run him all over the world for a couple of years. I guess he is the outstanding Tamil Christian. He certainly does not like British or American imperialism, I might add.9

Subsequent service in the churches confirm the simultaneously local, regional, and global leadership roles that consumed the remainder of his life: preacher (with John R. Mott) at the first session of the World Council of Churches (W.C.C.) (1948); chair of the Youth Department of the W.C.C. (1948–52); secretary of the Evangelism Department of the W.C.C. (1953–58); participant at key W.C.C. assemblies in Evanston (1954), New Delhi (1961), and Uppsala (1968); first general secretary of the East Asian Christian Council (1957–68); co-chairman of the World Christian Federation (from 1958); Henry Emerson Fosdick Professor at Union Theological Seminary, New York (1959–60); participant in the World Methodist Council (from

chairman of the East Asian Christian Council (from 1968); member of the presidium of the W.C.C. (from 1968); and president of the Methodist Church Conference in Ceylon (from 1968). Undoubtedly, ecumenical Christianity lost a towering figure with the death of D. T. Niles in India on July 17, 1970. As Wesley Ariarajah memorialized him at the commencement of the D. T. Niles Lectures, Niles’s commitment to the universal and particular set him apart among leaders in his day:

At the time of his death, DT was the President of the Methodist Church in Sri Lanka, the President of the CCA and one of the Presidents of the World Council of Churches. It is significant that he held these three positions at the same time because DT was absolutely convinced that the One Ecumenical Movement has its local, regional and global expressions and that any true ecumenist must be committed to its expressions at all three levels.¹⁰

As any review of these leadership roles substantiates, Niles’s Christian vocation flowed from a tireless commitment to global evangelism and, simultaneously, persistent ministry among local Methodist churches in Sri Lanka. Niles’s commitment to local, regional, and global facets of the Christian churches corresponded to a contextually-sensitive Spirit-ecclesiology. While Niles was sometimes criticized for proliferating Barthian theology, he remained a committed Methodist even as he advocated for the Methodist Church in Ceylon to move towards formal church union with other Protestant denominations in the region.¹¹ Along with marked Barthian interests, Niles’s writings reflect a strong Wesleyan theological and spiritual heritage:

the emphasis on “experimental religion,” the need for a “personal encounter with Jesus Christ” and “personal decision and commitment”;

¹⁰ S. Wesley Ariarajah, “Time for Fullness of Life for All,” D. T. Niles Lecture, Eleventh General Assembly of the Christian Conference of Asia (2000), 1. Ariarajah also notes Niles’s oratorical gifts, stating that “[i]n my 30 years of continuous involvement in the ecumenical movement I am yet to come across a preacher who had the charisma, command, resourcefulness, and authority that D. T. Niles had as a preacher.”

¹¹ C. F. Andrews at Tambaram in 1938; cf. Langford, who notes Niles’s formal education following World War I as drawing from Barthian, Eastern Orthodox sources as well as the Frenchman Pierre Maury and Scottish John Baillie: “And all these rich resources were sifted from his Asian background” (238). Niles prominently mentions Dietrich Bonhoeffer, John Baillie, Karl Barth, Donald Baillie, Henrick Kraemer, Visser ’t Hooft, and Reinhold Niebuhr in We Know in Part ([Philadelphia: Westminster, 1964], 18–19), Niles’s so-called sequel to John A. T. Robinson’s Honest to God [1963]).
the indispensability of “holy living”; the centrality of the Bible, reflected in the deep rooting of all his writings in scriptural Christianity; the emphasis, evident in his ecumenical concern, on the “universal-ity of the will of God for salvation”; and the emphasis on the doctrine of “prevenient grace,” which played a significant role in his theology of dialogue.12

Throughout his writings, Niles articulated a decidedly Trinitarian theology, with vivid Christocentric features offset by subtle pneumatological elements.13 In this article, I recover D. T. Niles’s development of a robust, pneumatological model of the church. The church, Niles claims, is the family of God that proclaims Jesus Christ by the Spirit among individuals, communities, and nations.14

The Spirit of God

Niles, as with so many other Methodist leaders before him, was not a systematic theologian. Emerito Nacpil’s struggle to bring aspects of Niles’s thought into systematic shape illumines the challenge his readers face: “I remember probing the stories he told and the thought-images he wrought for their logical structure and systematic connections. His answer to me was: ‘the trouble with you,

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13 Langford highlights Niles’s (Methodist) Trinitarian method against the predominant Christocentric interpretation of Niles’s writings, claiming that Niles “found this theme congenial to the Asian idea of wholeness; and the two cultures were wedded as both the immanence and transcendence of God were stressed . . . the Holy Spirit, through whom God graciously calls persons, and by whom persons are made responsive to God” (Langford 238).
14 Notably, while Niles’s did not claim, to my knowledge, a Pentecostal experience of Spirit-baptism, his work has certainly been received as conducive to such developments in India and abroad: Dayalan Niles’s exposition of his father’s pneumatology includes explicit attention to the gifts of the Spirit, including the gifts of tongues, discernment, and prophecy. The chapters on the Holy Spirit are among those D. T. did not complete prior to his death, leaving these to be written by his son: “These chapters are once again very incomplete. They are attempts by me to state my father’s teaching. Whenever I have ventured to use my own ideas I have tried to do so in such a way that they would be in agreement with my father’s thinking. As you read these chapters you may recall familiar things that were better stated by Papa himself. I take full responsibility for all that is mentioned in these chapters, but at the same time hope that, though inadequate, these will give a glimpse of the lines on which Papa thought about the articles of the creed and the work of the Holy Spirit (Dayalan Niles, “Compiler’s Preface,” A Testament of Faith, compiled by Dayalan Niles [London: Epworth, 1972], 10).
systematic theologians, is that you keep looking for links and connections where there are none, and when you discover that there are none, you supply them and then you think you are doing theology. Systematic theology is a respectable way of distorting the biblical message."  

"Distorting" is strong language, and whether it is a fully adequate disclaimer or not, Nacpil's recollection poignantly situates the mission of the man: Niles was above all an evangelist and a practical theologian concerned with faith as lived in the world.

Despite these reservations, however, Niles's theology maintains a fairly consistent shape across the spectrum of his many works. In *The Power at Work Among Us* (1968), Niles developed a series of Lenten devotionals from Ephesians 3:20 ("Now unto him that is able to do exceeding abundantly above all that we ask or think, according to the power that worketh in us . . .") and attends to the manner in which God has shown himself to be active in the lives of people throughout history. Elsewhere, Niles likened the Spirit to the wind (John 3:8) and to fire (Acts 2:3). To know the Spirit one must 'stand where the Spirit blows. There, where God is so obviously at work, is the place to be caught by the Spirit of God.'  

The Spirit so consumes the lives of some that those around are subject to the "sparks" that fall around them: "A Christian congregation is a failure if, in its midst, the Spirit does not break out into flame and fire; if, there, those who do not have the Spirit do not receive Him."  

Niles believed that reflection on the Holy Spirit points to the triune God, whose own nature is social and indicates the nature of right relationships in creation: "The doctrine of the Trinity seeks to say that the personality of God is not unitary but societary. Community rather than individuality is the true hallmark of personality."  

The Holy Spirit has become the inheritance of those who are in Christ. The Christian gospel is unlike Hinduism in this respect, for Hindu avatars are not incarnations but revelations. In Jesus Christ, God incarnate participates in the "movement of history" and continues to act through

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15 Emerito Nacpil (then President, Union Theological Seminary, Manila, Philippines) in “Renewing the Church for Christian Action” in *Christian Action in the Asian Struggle* (Singapore: Christian Conference of Asia, 1973), 31.

16 Niles, *Upon the Earth*, 65.


18 Niles, *We Know in Part*, 63. Niles claims that "[t]he family of God in Christ is God's answer to the world hungry for community. We falsify God's answer by offering it a World Council of Churches" (D. T. Niles, "The Church's Call to Mission and Unity," *The Ecumenical Review* 5 [1953]: 246; “The Church’s Call” was later edited and reprinted as “The Confessing Church and Unity,” *South East Asia Journal of Theology* 8 [1966]: 197–200).
the resurrection. But God is active in history, claims Niles, through “a double entrance”: “He becomes part of it in Jesus Christ. He makes this part embrace the whole through the Holy Spirit. Jesus Christ is the content of the Gospel—the good news of what God has done. The Holy Spirit is the missionary of the Gospel. It is He who makes the Gospel explosive in men’s lives and in human affairs.”19 This second entrance finds experiential proof in the lives of those who receive God and marks the “first installment” of a future inheritance: “for we shall inherit God himself and our place in the fullness of His work which He has now begun in us and in His whole creation.”20 Elsewhere Niles related fellowship with God in terms that indicate the same fellowship enjoyed by the Son and the Spirit. The work of God involves a living relationship with God’s Son and Spirit, so that it is never only “Do you believe in Jesus Christ?,” but always also “Have you received the Holy Spirit?”

Christian discipleship is exercised both in the fellowship of the Holy Spirit and in the company of the Son—Jesus Christ. Apart from the fellowship of the Holy Spirit there is no deed of discipleship in which we can participate, apart from the company of Jesus Christ there is no one to whom we can be disciples. He works and we work with Him, the Holy Spirit himself preparing the works which we must perform (Eph. 2:10).21

Thus pneumatology grounds Niles’s entire vision of the churches, whether in evangelism, unity, or the movements of history:

The evangelizing community is the fellowship of the Holy Spirit; and by this fellowship of the Holy Spirit we mean nothing else and nothing less than the churches in their oneness. An equal truth is that the Holy Spirit at work in the world is what makes the very mission of the Church possible. Were not the Holy Spirit besieging every soul, were not the Holy Spirit controlling the currents of history, were not the Holy Spirit gathering the nations—nothing which the churches can do would make any difference. All history, that of the Church and that of the world, is set towards this end.22

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19 Niles, Upon the Earth, 67.
21 Niles, Upon the Earth, 64–65; Niles, The Preacher’s Calling to be Servant, 107.
22 Niles, Upon the Earth, 167–68.
To be part of the community of God is to participate in the fellowship known first and eternally within the Godhead. Even as God is one, so the church is one fellowship by the power of the Spirit. The Spirit works in the life of every person and “controls” the course of nations and history. Yet the Spirit does so by way of proclaiming Jesus Christ (1 John 4:2): “He thrusts the Church out to make this proclamation, He empowers the Church to make it under all circumstances, He effects in the Church a demonstration of it, He gives to men the gifts of repentance and faith by which they accept the Lord who is proclaimed and confess Him.”

Niles’s conception of the Spirit’s work correlates with a Wesleyan doctrine of prevenient grace. Whenever Niles speaks of the non-believer, he does so in recognition that God is already at work in the individual long before the evangelist proclaims the gospel. Niles’s pluralist cultural setting accentuated the contours of his doctrine of prevenient grace, even to the extent of reaching those who have never heard the gospel. The accent is on God’s sovereign work: “A person is determined not only by his country, by his religion, by his own immediate situation. He is also determined by the fact that the Holy Spirit is working in him and for him, preparing him for the acceptance of Jesus Christ. The evangelist comes last in time.” Niles’s attention to the power of local situation signals his contribution to emerging conversations about indigenous or contextual theology. Yet his point also cuts to the heart of evangelistic practice beyond theological matters. The work of God—the work of the Spirit—is already present with the individual, community, and throughout creation before the evangelist ever arrives: “Jesus and the Holy Spirit are already there at work—Jesus challenging recognition and acceptance, the Holy Spirit inducing repentance and faith. This means that evangelism requires discernment about the hour at which a person stands in the working of the Holy Spirit.”

Nonetheless, while allowing for the work of the Spirit to precede direct Christian proclamation, Niles emphasized the priority of the Spirit’s witness to Christ. Furtado wonders if Niles’s religious environment, in which the term

23 Niles, *Upon the Earth*, 69.
24 Furtado, for example, links Niles’s emphasis on the “previousness of Christ” to the theology of E. Stanley Jones and Methodist traditions of prevenient grace (*The Contribution of Dr. D. T. Niles*, 168–69).
“grace” can be rather “meaningless,” leads to his avoidance of “prevenient grace” in favor of the plainer language of Christ and the Spirit. Regardless, the Spirit’s work inevitably points—either directly or indirectly—to Jesus Christ: “There is no other guarantee of the truth of our witness except that it is caught and held within the witness of the Holy Spirit to Jesus Christ and of Jesus Christ to himself.” The witness of Christ’s disciples remains Spirit-witness, compelled by the power of the Spirit who provides authority and “enabling power.” Without the Spirit, witness is vapid, lifeless, without power. True witness depends on the Spirit who testifies to Christ: “Actually, there is only one witness to Christ and that is the witness of the Holy Spirit. The witness of Christians is but a witness to His witness. He indwells the Church and gives it gifts in order that with those gifts the Church may witness to His witness. He indwells the Church and gives it gifts in order that with those gifts the Church may witness to Him.”

The Spirit and New Community

The church, by the Holy Spirit, is a new community and a witness to the truth in Jesus Christ: it “is not simply a company of witnesses, it is itself the witnessing community; so that the witness of the individual preacher must find its locus in the witness of the Church as a whole.” How did this new community form? The death and resurrection of Christ set forth new possibilities for the world. New creation “came into being” through the unity of Christ and the church. The world is redeemed through this union; new creation now exists as the “habitation of the Spirit.” The church is thereby a fellowship joined together in Christ through the Spirit. Niles criticized churches in the United States, where too often the concept of fellowship was invoked at mid-century as an activity or, grammatically, “a verb.” The New Testament vision of fellowship is rather different, he thought. The church is the new community gathered

29 Niles, The Preacher’s Calling to be Servant, 32.
30 Niles, The Preacher’s Calling to be Servant, 22.
33 Niles, That They May Have Life, 71.
with all its peculiarities and differences; in the New Testament, “fellowship” is a noun. Niles reproved the churches in the West in sharp words of disapproval: “To-day, when we fellowship with one another, we seek out the people we like either because they hold the same theology, or belong to the same class, or have the right colour. The result is not a Church but a mutual admiration society.”

The fellowship of the Christian community, by contrast, should instantiate the heavenly kingdom.

In eschatological perspective, the church, ever forward-looking, is already realizing the end and witnesses to the “guarantee of the certainty of that end.” Reflecting on the Apostles’ Creed, Niles asked: “How then do we prepare to meet Jesus when He comes and whenever He comes?—by the life lived in the Holy Spirit within the fellowship of the Church. It is in the Church that Jesus is known already and confessed as Lord.” Niles thereby rejected any notion of a static church, emphasizing instead the “process of becoming” that it continually works out: “We experience it in the Church when the Church confronts the world in the power of the Holy Spirit. The existence of the Holy Spirit in the Church is not a static existence, an existence that can be taken for granted; rather it is a dynamic existence, an existence in the Church when the Church is the Church.”

Niles drew on Ephesians 5, recognizing that it is Christ who cleanses the church and sanctifies it. This signals the ongoing, perfecting work of Christ and, in a distinctive, Wesleyan tone, Niles called the church “the society where the healing processes of Christ are at work.” The church is the place where God’s word is proclaimed, where the means of grace are administered, and where the fellowship of God’s family is realized.

Although there is no evidence that Niles completed a systematic study of the writings of either John Wesley or Karl Barth, each contributed to the unique contours of his ecclesiology. Consider, for example, Wesley’s later statements on the church, especially those written after 1784, as the Methodist movement faced the implications of his decision to ordain Thomas Coke, Richard Whatcoat, and Thomas Vasey to meet the needs of the churches in

34 Niles, The Preacher’s Calling to be Servant, 29.
37 Niles, That They May Have Life, 71.
38 Niles speaks of the Asian practice of decorating bamboo poles with coconuts to illustrate the difference between true and false fruit among the churches (“The Ecumenical Task,” 20); on the healing work of the church, see Randy Maddox’s Responsible Grace: John Wesley’s Practical Theology (Nashville: Kingswood, 1994).
39 Niles, The Power at Work, 47.
America. Wesley’s sermon “Of the Church” (1785) addressed the nature of the church with reference to Ephesians 4:1–6:

I beseech you that ye walk worthy of the vocation wherewith ye are called, with all lowliness and meekness, with long-suffering, forbearing one another in love; endeavouring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. There is one body, and one Spirit, even as ye are called in one hope of your calling; one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is above all, and through all, and in you all.

While many people talk about the church, few understand its true composition. With Cyprian, Wesley affirmed that “where two or three believers are met together, there is a church” (echoing Christ’s own words in Matthew 18:20). But, the church is no mere building or a single congregation, as is commonly supposed. For Wesley, as for Niles, the church includes all the saints and holy persons who assemble together whether gathered in the home of a family, a city, or a nation.

In its fullest sense, the church includes “all the persons in the universe whom God hath so called out of the world as to entitle them to . . . be ‘one body’, united by ‘one spirit’; having ‘one faith, one hope, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is above all, and through all, and in them all.” Throughout, the church depends upon the life-giving power of the Holy Spirit. The church is animated by the Spirit, “the fountain of all spiritual life.” The church is adopted by the Spirit, who witnesses continually “that they are the children of God.” Indeed, this is the same Spirit who fills heaven and earth, as Virgil recognized in Aeneid: “The all-informing soul, / That fills, pervades, and actuates the whole.” The Articles of the Church of England, a national church, rightly indicate the centrality of “faithfulness” in the definition of church, but go too far by demanding purity in doctrine and sacrament: “The visible church of Christ is a congregation of faithful men, in which the pure word of God is

43 Wesley, “Of the Church,” §8, in Works, 3:49.
preached, and the sacraments duly administered.” To declare such a high standard of every church excludes too many otherwise faithful congregations. Roman Catholics and dissenters alike often inculcate false opinions and failings in the administration of the sacraments, yet Wesley remained confident that these, too, belong to the one, true church.

It is certainly not surprising that, as a Methodist, Niles often resonated with John Wesley’s writings, but he was also indebted to Karl Barth, especially Barth’s identification of the church’s outward-focused mission and Christian proclamation. Barth maintained that the church “arises and is only as the Holy Spirit works—the quickening power of the living Lord Jesus Christ.” Moreover, like the two natures of the incarnate Son, the invisible power of God is known in the visible being of the Christian community. Still, while the Christian community is that body of believers who are drawn together in unity by the power of the Spirit, the community does not exist in the world for its own sake. Rather, the community is called together by God for a specific task: “He makes of them His people, His body, and makes them its members . . . He awakens them—this is the origin of their task—as a community to confess Him.” With Barth, Niles maintained that the proclamation of the gospel is an unmistakable mark of the Christian church. In proclamation, others are given a “spiritual gift” and the church itself is exposed to the saving action of God. In turn, Christ’s work on the cross “becomes contemporary” again and again. Through the life of the church, the means of grace are made available to all as individuals and structures of society alike submit to the lordship of the Father.

Niles, however, believed that Christian proclamation, however, demands more than confession. Proclamation, especially in a pluralist culture, requires active listening and identification: “In a true conversation about the gospel, we not only tell the good news but also listen to it. Indeed, even when we are

49 Barth, Church Dogmatics, IV.3.2:726.
50 Barth, Church Dogmatics, IV.3.2:796.
51 Niles, The Power at Work, 47.
52 Niles, The Power at Work, 54. Niles briefly mentions the role of caste (53).
Talking to those who are not Christians, if we listen carefully, we shall find that they, too, are telling us about the ways in which God in Christ has been at work in their lives. News of the Christ-incognito is also good news. Too often, we are so anxious to tell the good news that we miss listening to it.”  

Failure to recognize the work of the Spirit of Christ leads to a demeaning attitude towards others. Christians often regard non-believers as little more than “prospective” converts, but Niles warned that such individuals are already “within the saving ministry of Christ” and true conversation will lead to startling discoveries of faith. As a listening community, the church proclaims even as it listens to the other.” Non-believers may not recognize God’s power at work, but they speak of God’s active presence nonetheless.  

Identification also occurs in proclamation when Christians reject the position of the “elder brother” (Luke 15:25–32) and live the message of the incarnation. In one early writing, Niles compared the witness of the church to warfare over-against metaphors of refuge (e.g. “Noah’s Ark”): “there can be no metaphor to describe the Church than to call it an army—the Church Militant—an army to which is committed the task of destroying sin and the seed of sin, of chasing darkness and the powers of darkness, and of planting the flag of freedom on the citadel of human life.” Later writings typically abandoned such militant images in favor of familial ones, but the persistence of an active rather than passive church remains. Again and again, Niles extoled the witness of missionaries and pastors who established the truth of the gospel by demonstrating its power through concrete, incontrovertible actions. The pastor who takes in an orphaned child wins respect—and, frequently, converts—within the community. Niles’s focus on the active encounter with God was central to his understanding of evangelism. His famous definition of evangelism—“one beggar telling another beggar where to get food”—was a reflection of Niles’s commitment to relational, active witness through identification: “It is not his

53 Niles, The Power at Work, 53.
54 Niles, The Power at Work, 97.
55 Niles, The Power at Work, 49. Niles believed that there was a persistent temptation among Christians to imagine themselves as distinguished in God’s delight. He finds in Psalm 18 a recognition of God’s delight in all creation: “To the faithful you show yourself faithful, to the blameless you show yourself blameless, to the pure you show yourself pure, but to the devious you show yourself shrewd. You save the humble but bring low those whose eyes are haughty” (Ps. 18:25–27). These verses mark “the transition from themselves to others” that all God’s children must make.
knowledge of God that he shares, it is to God himself that he points.” The same concept bolstered Mahatma Gandhi’s authority:

A member of the wealthy and English-educated class in India, he so identified himself with his people that he became the means of their resistance to Imperial power. A member of the high-caste community, he so identified himself with the out-caste that he became their bulwark against oppression. A member of the Hindu faith, he so identified himself with the cause of the Muslims that those who preached hate against the Muslims felt compelled to murder him.

For Niles, the lesson for Christians was clear: the church cannot remain satisfied with simply proclaiming the gospel in words or even providing important services such as “orphanages or old-age homes.” Rather, the church must ever remain committed to a “permanent concern for all who are weak and defenceless.”

Niles’s frequently linked comments on the fellowship of the church to the particularity of visible churches. The church is ever active: “Human history is in bondage, but the Church emerges within human history as a result of God’s deliverance.” The church arises from God’s call in history and the church’s response to that call marks its mission in society as “a holy nation, a pilgrim people, a royal priesthood.” The mission of Christ weaves “the many strands of human history into one movement.” So, when addressing his own Methodist Church in Ceylon (Sri Lanka), Niles described its formation as part of the distinctive work of God calling people out of bondage through the heroic sacrifice of a few missionaries. The founding of the Methodist Church in Ceylon, for example, began with Thomas Coke’s rather “ordinary request.” The first to volunteer for the task was Thomas Hall Squance, who “had not much longer to live” due to lung disease. While Coke never arrived in Ceylon, Squance eventually “led that heroic band,” founded the church in 1814, and pioneered the

57 Niles, That They May Have Life, 96.
58 Niles, The Preacher’s Calling to be Servant, 87.
59 Niles, The Preacher’s Calling to be Servant, 87–88.
60 Niles, “The Church’s Call to Mission and Unity,” 244.
61 Niles, “The Church’s Call to Mission and Unity,” 244.
62 D. T. Niles, “The Ecumenical Task,” South East Asia Journal of Theology 5 (1963): 20; Niles further claimed that salvation in Jesus Christ “is no simple salvation of the soul. It is a salvation of the whole man. It is not a salvation of persons only. It is a salvation of the whole universe. It is not just a salvation of the Christian community. It is a salvation of human history” (23).
work of the Methodists in the North Ceylon District as well as South India. The Methodist Church in Ceylon was called out of bondage through the Spirit-inspired witness of the church.

Niles’s systematic interest in the historical origins of the particular churches highlights the problematic roots of Western Christian interests. Too frequently, Niles thought, the churches have preached a gospel that is mere religion, disguised under the name of Christianity. Even in his early ecumenical participation, Niles challenged the tendency of Western missionaries to inculcate a foreign religion rather than proclaim the gospel. Niles, who lived as a Christian minority, warned that Christianity often appeared to reflect imperialist, Western interests. Responding to a question about the function of the missionary at Tambaram (1938), Niles urged that

We of India do not care for a merely theological expression of Christianity, nor for an ecclesiastical expression, nor for a church-governmental expression. All the different expressions of theological dogma, ecclesiastical mechanism and governmental device are useless and meaningless to us. Christianity needs to be expressed in life-situations, it must be a matter of life-expression, and that is what we want.

Thus, the service of Western missionaries should not be rejected or despised, but roles should be clarified. The chief end of the missionary is not leadership, but guidance, witness, and cooperation. Niles noted that the Indian tendency towards “unhistorical” thinking is “a conscious protest against the course of history. A great deal of past history has been initiated and dominated by the West: and to many the question remains unanswered as to whether God is bound by the past and its precedents as much as sometimes we are asked to believe.” This is not to say that Niles condemned the history of missions work among the “younger churches.” The mission compound, so

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commonly condemned in recent times, actually had served a rather vital purpose: “It brought together into a common life the missionary, the local pastor, the doctor, the teacher, the nurse, the sweeper, and made that life the witness of the Church to Christ.”67 In such a common life, the church depended on the work of the Holy Spirit. Through the development of Christian ashrams such as E. Stanley Jones’s Sat Tal and Jaffna’s Christa Seva Ashram in 1939, an “inescapable dependence” on the Spirit and community has been recovered once again: “It is when one learns to live in community that the work of each arises from and is dependent on the shared life of all.”68

Christians in Ceylon were acutely aware of their need for one another, especially as the Tamil minority suffered under Sinhala political legislation in the later 1950s.69 Cooperative, interdenominational efforts among the churches were a mainstay in twentieth-century church relations. Even in early missionary work, shared places of worship existed among Baptists and Wesleyans.70 Collaboration flowed out of the ecumenical and missional interests at Edinburgh (1910) and flourished after another Methodist, John R. Mott, visited Colombo in 1912. Mott’s visit led to the establishment of the National Christian Council of Ceylon and, subsequently, “practical steps were taken in the same direction in founding the Ceylon Training Colony in 1914 by the Anglican, Methodist, and the Baptist Churches, and the erecting of a chapel in the Peradeniya Training Colony.”71

Yet, as an active participant in the discussions about church union between Anglicans, Methodists, and other Protestant bodies in Ceylon, Pakistan, and Northern India, Niles came face-to-face with the failings of local church leadership. In the past, the churches in Ceylon made the mistake of holding conferences, talking about problems, and then “decided to do nothing, hoping that the problems would disappear.”72 The church of Jesus Christ must continue moving, he thought, must remain uncomfortable with the status quo. According to one American missionary account of Niles’s view of Christian conferences, “D. T. came back from the Evanston Conference with

67 Niles, The Preacher’s Calling to be Servant, 24.
68 Niles, The Preacher’s Calling to be Servant, 24; Small, A History of the Methodist Church in Ceylon, 553–54; Furtado, The Contribution of Dr. D. T. Niles, 55–56.
72 Niles, The Power at Work, 120.
a definition he picked up there: ‘A conference is a place where a lot of important people who do nothing individually get together to agree that they can do nothing collectively.’\textsuperscript{73} Niles’s diplomatic gifts were not lost on his peers, however, as the letter continues:

DT is a tactful manager of folks who is always saying, “I agree with the Bishop” when really he agrees with him just part way and is trying to get the Bishop to give up some point of view. So the Bishop said recently that HIS definition of a Conference is “A meeting where many people come with widely differing views and find that they are all in agreement with D. T. Niles.”\textsuperscript{74}

While the letter reveals Niles’s magnetic personality, his view of true Christian community was quite the opposite. Rather than being a place of conflicting wills in a struggle over power, the church is a community dedicated to humble service in Jesus Christ: “Men build true community only as that community is dedicated to live by and to serve God’s will and purpose. No true community can be built in the service of wrong. Human selfishness makes that impossible.\textsuperscript{75} Even the concept of heaven finds its best expression not in the notion of everlasting reward or punishment, but in the form of new community as already tasted in the fellowship of the present age: “the end is the redemption of the family of man and all the relationships in which men find themselves.”\textsuperscript{76}

\section*{The Church as Family}

While Niles invoked numerous images and themes to capture the idea of the church, none is more prominent and persistently appealed to in his writings than the church as the fellowship of the family: “Human history has the family instituted at its very centre, and in that experience which family life brings is the

\textsuperscript{73} Unpublished letter from Robert Holmes, February 14, 1955 (Folder 2–1), in “Papers of W. Robert & Frances Holmes, Collection 405,” Billy Graham Center Archives, Wheaton College, Illinois. In the same letter, Holmes commented on Niles’s enthusiastic approval of the Methodist practice of conferencing: “[Niles] says the agenda for all Methodist annual meetings the world over is the same. So he says John Wesley was SOME administrator—his arrangements for 1754 are still good for 1954 and that is amazing.”

\textsuperscript{74} Unpublished letter from Robert Holmes, February 14, 1955 (Folder 2–1), in “Papers of W. Robert & Frances Holmes, Collection 405.”

\textsuperscript{75} Niles, \textit{The Power at Work}, 69.

\textsuperscript{76} Niles, “What is the Church For?,” 6.
flower which will open to the sunshine of God’s visit.” In *The Power at Work Among Us*, Niles summarized this claim in a study of “life together”:

> The Christian life is a life we live together. It is a family life. The gathering together of this family is the burden of the New Testament story. It is not simply that the Christian life cannot be lived by each one by himself. It is rather that the Christian life must not be so lived.”

The image is as thoroughly biblical as it is Wesleyan. Wesley himself proclaimed that the “one God and Father of all” has given “the Spirit of adoption, which ‘crieth in their hearts, Abba, Father.’” Niles’s use of the image of family reflected both an interest in and critique of contemporary theological developments. Many Protestant theologians at mid-century had come to affirm the theological principle of the fatherhood of God and the brotherhood of humanity, but Niles elucidated a familial vision of God’s parental work in the world: “We have made this a banal proposition in our time by talking about the Fatherhood of God and the brotherhood of man. The consequence of the Fatherhood of God is the family of man.” For Niles, it is the Father who gathers his children together. The image of family thereby invokes the personal dimensions of relationality, especially insofar as the family is constituted by a living father who draws his children into communion with himself and one another. Here, once again, Niles countered Western theological tropes with language at once biblical and local.

God’s church is “the family in Christ,” he claimed, composed of all who accept “the consequences and obligations of having been loved by the Father through the Son.” Pentecost marked the indwelling of God in the church and its members together in common life under the living lordship of the Father through the Son and in the Holy Spirit. The indwelling power of the Spirit in the church sets the family of God apart from all other social structures. In a lecture at Princeton Seminary, Niles offered a scathing critique of North

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78 Niles, *The Power at Work*, 40. The influence of Bonhoeffer appears especially evident at this point.
80 Niles, “What is the Church For?,” 4.
81 Niles, *The Power at Work*, 44; cf. Niles claims elsewhere that “[t]he church is the Christian family. They are children of the one Father” (D. T. Niles, “What is the Church For?,” *Princeton Seminary Bulletin* 58.3 [1965]: 3).
American religious practices, chastising congregations for approaching the church according to principles of Western democracy, allowing divisions over race and “color castes” to divide God’s family, and dividing life in Christ on Sunday mornings from the practices of everyday life throughout the week. So totalizing was Niles’s understanding of the family of God that (unlike John Wesley) he would not even permit distinctions between “real” and “nominal” Christians. Speaking out of an Asian context of religious pluralism, Niles affirmed all who would take up the name of Christian (even when faced with one who rejects the Incarnation, atonement, and resurrection):

In a world where you can bear many names, you have chosen to bear the name of Jesus Christ . . . His theology may be all wrong, his ethics may be all wrong, he may live a bad life, and may be a scoundrel or a rogue, but he is a Christian . . . Its composition is determined by its Lord. Its constitution is determined by its Lord. And we have to learn to live within this family, and there are members within this family with whom we disagree violently, and other members with whom we agree violently, but it is still the family.

These words reflect Niles’s deep commitment to Christian unity flowing from the common mission of the churches.

Niles believed that where divisions exist, they ought to be healed, even at the expense of denominational concern. The churches must work towards visible union based on an understanding of the common work of the Holy Spirit through diverse means of grace (that is, the diversity of churches may serve as vehicles of God’s gracious activity). Even Niles’s own Methodist church was called to such a union. Niles maintained that John Wesley separated from the

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82 Niles, “What is the Church For?,” 8. Among other issues, Niles challenged the notion of unequal pay among American churches: “You see, your whole American system in this needs radical change because it is theologically invalid. The institution and its laws must reflect the theological truths which decide what the church is” (10).

83 Niles, “What is the Church For?,” 9.

84 Notably, although a plan for church union in Ceylon was produced by 1949, “a small minority of those vociferously opposed to the union challenged the vote in the courts, and an injunction against the union was obtained. Though the judgment of the court was given on June 20, 1974, stating that it was not a ‘suitable case to grant a declaration restraining the plaintiffs [sic] action with costs,’ the intended church union was not realized even years later” (Rasiah, “Sri Lanka,” 52).

Church of England not because of “any quarrel between John Wesley and the Church of England on any point of doctrine or order,” but rather “because he was under compulsion to serve the cause of mission in the New World.”

In fact, Wesley had defended his own actions in the sermon “On Schism” (1786), claiming that formal separation was less problematic than “an alienation of affection” or “division of heart” among those who otherwise appear to be an “outwardly united” society. By contrast, Niles claimed that the Methodist churches in Ceylon faced an alternate set of needs:

> It is again the same cause of mission which is demanding that the division between these two churches should be healed. Should we be as committed to mission as John Wesley was, we would take as many risks for Union as he took when he broke with the Church of England. The past as he faced it is over; but the obedience which he rendered is still our guide as we face the present.

Denominations will eventually fade, but the fellowship of the church, the family of God, remains.

**The Family of Creation**

The second sense of the church as family incorporates the participation of the individual within the communion of all creation, since “all are children of the one Father.” John Wesley, in his sermon “Of the Church,” maintained that the

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89 Cf. “the nations shall bring their treasures into Zion, but denominations must sooner or later cease to possess peculiar treasures” (Niles, “The Church’s Call to Mission and Unity,” 246). The obstruction of formal church union in Sri Lanka just five years after his death certainly would have grieved Niles: “In late 1975, church union between Anglicans, Methodists, Presbyterians, CSI, and Baptists was finally ready, and the united Church of Lanka was to be inaugurated on 16 November 1975, the bishop having been already elected. Shortly beforehand the country’s supreme court pronounced the proposed basis of union to be in conflict with the constitution of the country, enforcing abandonment of the inauguration and an indefinite delay in the creation of the new church” (Barrett, *World Christian Encyclopedia*, 697).
90 Niles, *The Power at Work*, 44. Niles rejected universalism, nonetheless: “[‘Hell is for the blind and not for them that see,’ so that if we insist on being blind we must end up in hell]” (*The Power at Work*, 56).
Spirit is present everywhere (as Virgil attests), but “in a peculiar manner” among members of the family of God. John cited his brother’s “Groaning for the Spirit of Adoption”: “Making your souls his loved abode, / The temples of indwelling God.”⁹¹ For Niles, the church’s function parallels the role given by Wesley to the individual, serving as a light and life-bearing agent of redemption within creation. The Christian family is not a separate entity, existing apart from the rest of creation, but “within the human family” and bearing “a saving relationship to the world.”⁹² The church functions as a living symbol of humanity. The church is “the nucleus, the token, the sign, the symbol, the first experience, and the guarantee of the human family.”⁹³ In this second sense, the church plays a pivotal role in the larger community, by “strengthening and sweetening the family life of the human family.” Unlike Karl Barth, Niles could not so easily dismiss religions as mere “unbelief”:

In the course of the conversation, he [Barth] said, “Other religions are just unbelief.” I remember replying with the question, “How many Hindus, Dr. Barth, have you met?” He answered, “No one.” I said, “How then do you know that Hinduism is unbelief?” He said, “A priori.” I simply shook my head and smiled.⁹⁴

According to Niles, Pentecost marks “the culmination of God’s method in the redemption of history” not simply because the Spirit is poured out for the life of the church, but even for the whole of creation. The Spirit is made available to all insofar as God’s power is now available “for the total human community” by “the presence of the Christian community within it.” The Spirit is known in power through the church that witnesses to Christ and convinces “the world of sin and of righteousness and of judgment” (John 16:8).⁹⁵ While other religious traditions remained in need of the gospel and subject to Christian proclamation, they could not be dismissed by Niles as mere unbelief because he regarded the adherents of other faiths as individuals under the lordship of the heavenly Father whether they recognized his authority and care or not. Rather, individual Hindus, Buddhists, or Muslims are fit sources

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⁹¹ Wesley, “Of the Church,” §13, in Works, 3:50 (John makes minor changes to the form found in Hymns and Sacred Poems [1740]).
⁹² Niles, The Power at Work, 57.
⁹³ Niles, “What is the Church For?,” 4.
⁹⁵ Niles, The Power at Work, 48.
of individual comparison. Rather than denying the Hindu’s spiritual concerns, Niles recognized his neighbor’s needs in relation to his own: “For example, I am a Christian and my next-door neighbor is a Hindu. He is a good man, a religious man. I am the same kind of person. I earn about the same amount of money as he does. . . .” Niles associated a Wesleyan commitment to the prevenient work of the Spirit to the particularity of the church’s witness. In The Power at Work Among Us, Niles interpreted John 10:16 (“And I have other sheep, that are not of this fold; I must bring them also”) as a reference to the saving work of God drawing all people into his care. He asks:

Are not all men within the love and ministry of God in Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit? God made all men. God loves all men. All men are within His providence. For all men Jesus died. In all men God’s Spirit is at work. All men, at the end, will be judged by Jesus Christ. These things are all true of all men whether they know it or not, like it or not, accept it or not.  

For Niles, the failure to recognize the lordship of Christ is not a testament to God’s inaction. Rather, the individual remains within the care of a loving God. Notably, there are many who claim to be believers within the church, but their attitudes tend “to produce divisions in the Church and to cause wranglings and quarrels and dissensions.” By contrast, those beyond the church frequently include many whose lives testify to God’s greatness. The church’s mission is to identify the work of the Spirit already at work before explicit confession is made, “the church’s mission is to that end.” Niles believed that the case of the first prime minister of India, Jawaharlal Nehru, was especially instructive:

When Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru died, the Christian New Bulletin in Ceylon said that, inasmuch as he was not a Christian, his life and service were a challenge to Christian faith. Is this not an exact opposite of the truth? It is men like Nehru who point to the greatness of our God whose grace is seen as it works through men who do not acknowledge

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96 Niles, The Power at Work, 83.
97 Niles, The Power at Work, 96.
98 Niles, The Power at Work, 96. Niles compared this condition to the intellectually disabled child who is incapable of knowing a mother’s love: love exists even if the fulfillment of the mother’s love is incomplete (97).
99 Niles, The Power at Work, 98.
100 Niles, Upon the Earth, 86.
His name. There, in the life of that great statesman, was the hidden-
ness of God. That men like Nehru explained their lives in other
terms does not challenge the faith of the Christian. What is exposed
is the failure of Christians so to communicate the faith that men see
whom it is that they really serve and who it is to whom they really be-
long.\textsuperscript{101}

For Niles, the Spirit works even among those who do not name Christ and
thereby appear outside of the true church. Yet, with Nehru, as with Gandhi be-
fore him, faith is present even when unrecognized: “Believer and unbeliever
meet in Jesus Christ.”\textsuperscript{102}

The work of the Spirit throughout the world is not, however, a denial of the
special work of God in and through the church. Unlike John Wesley, who wor-
ried that enthusiastic notions of the Spirit might displace the centrality of spiri-
tual discipleship, Niles’s inter-religious context required special emphasis on
the priority of the Spirit as the agent of new creation in Christ.\textsuperscript{103} Just as the
prophets were special instruments of the Spirit in the Old Testament, so the
Spirit “\textit{today} belongs to the Church as a whole.”\textsuperscript{104} The ministry of the church
is always already the ministry of the Spirit, initiated and sustained by the “en-
compassing ministry” of the Spirit: “The ministry of the Holy Spirit in the
world is to recall the world to its moorings, to re-establish it on its true foun-
dation, to make actual the once-for-allness-for-all-men of what God has done for
man in Jesus Christ.”\textsuperscript{105}

\section*{The National Family}

Niles did not limit his exposition of the family of God to the Christian
church and family of creation alone. Between the local and the global, Niles as-
serted the church’s distinctly national role. Why? For Niles, a national union of

\textsuperscript{101}Niles, \textit{The Power at Work}, 105–6.
\textsuperscript{102}“Gandhi is greater, more moral, more spiritual that Niles, but still must answer the same
questions about Christ as any other man” (Niles, “The Evangelistic Situation,” 113).
\textsuperscript{103}On the Wesleys and eighteenth-century controversy surrounding Methodist enthu-
siasm, see Jeffrey W. Barbeau, “Enthusiasts, Rationalists and Pentecost: The Holy Spirit in
ed. Jeffrey W. Barbeau and Beth Felker Jones (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2015),
74–91.
\textsuperscript{104}Niles, “What is the Church For?,” 7.
\textsuperscript{105}Niles, \textit{Upon the Earth}, 71.
churches connected the historically particular manifestations of the church with the living image of the church as family: “I believe that Christ intends all Christians to be bound in one family life. This family life has to be served by the unities that are given to us in the secular order. Country and Nation give us one of these unities. The recovery of one family life for Christians belonging to the same country and nation is therefore a natural goal.”

Local churches in Ceylon, and elsewhere in the global South, needed to embrace the emergence of national churches as a part of their obedience to God. Since the call of God is “unto all the nations,” the churches must extend and mediate a “healing influence” within the nation. Anything less “throttles” God’s power and limits the work of the Holy Spirit in the land. As noted, the provision of a father for his family marks one aspect of Christian community. Food, clothing, and shelter are provided for one’s family out of concern for their common welfare. But here the image of family breaks down. The Christian is called to recognize that the power of God in creation extends not to one’s relations alone, but even to the whole of the created order:

Men become so anxious about these [food, clothing, and shelter], that they set out to provide these for themselves. They lose sight of the fact that food, clothing and shelter are part of God’s provision for men together and that, therefore, the way to obtain them is to seek the kingdom of God and the doing of His will among men.

Here, Niles takes what may be regarded as a rather surprising turn. Instead of speaking simplistically of the Christian’s larger human family, he relates the Christian church to national interest:

When I seek my own food, or food for my family, I am engaged in one kind of operation. When I seek to improve the economy of my country and its food production, then I am engaged in another kind of operation. Care for all must take the place of anxiety for oneself.

Niles’s concern for the place of Christian churches in the life of the nation should not be surprising. Beyond the majority Buddhist population, Hindus, Muslims,
and Christians also represented significant minority segments of the national populace. Yet Christians, in particular, had long been accused of undermining national interest, especially by the predominantly Theravada Buddhist Sinhalese. Niles advocated re-conceptualizing the term “nationalism” to encompass a range of meanings. In its most expansive sense, nationalism spans the range of identities within a politically-defined region. In a narrower sense, nationalism not only signals common geographically-demarcated interests, but also indicates the particular units that comprise a population. In its particular aspect, steel workers in Sheffield, scheduled castes in India, and cement workers of Germany each represent a kind of national body. In India and Sri Lanka, Christian nationalism had long been subject to close scrutiny. Christian rejection of religious and cultural Hindu rites, for example, seemed detrimental to the coherence of the social order. Niles, aware of this conflict, addressed the matter directly: “When in Ceylon, for instance, the Buddhists and Hindus accuse their fellow citizens who are Christians of being denationalized, they are saying in effect that the Christian mission to Ceylon has not been a mission to its nationality.”

Niles thereby developed a vision of church and nation that sidesteps these longstanding criticisms of Christianity. In Buddhism, Niles claimed, the end is escape from the meaninglessness of life, but Christian living requires that the lives of others in one’s community and nation are “taken seriously.”

Writing through decades of mid-century political change, Niles’s ecclesiology reflects the intense, national conversation then taking place in Ceylon. Nationalism is a duty—one best informed by Christian values—not an option:

You too probably are a nationalist. Most of us do take the nation seriously these days. But what is the basis of nationalism in Buddhism? Race, nation, history—these are outside the Buddhist circle of explanation. To the Christian, however, they are significant facts and find inclusion in his faith.

Nationalism was certainly a momentous topic in Sri Lankan society, but Niles maintained that nationalism is fulsomely biblical. Just as the Christian church and family of creation enjoy a symbiotic relationship, church and nation also share a common life. In the Old Testament, the call of Abraham was


part of an expansive, divine call to all nations. Israel was called out but continued to speak to and hear from the nations. In fact, God’s ongoing care for and lordship over all nations is too quickly forgotten in the name of a recognition of God’s distinctive work among the Israelites. The Hebrew prophets spoke by the Spirit’s inspiration even on matters of national concern:

Statecraft demanded an alliance with Egypt, but the prophet advised against it. National honour demanded rebellion, but the prophet counseled submission. War demanded stern measures, but the prophet pleaded for mercy. Military weakness demanded compromise, but the prophet advocated resistance. Is it any wonder that, so persistently, the word of the prophet was not heeded?

As with the counsel of the prophets so often ignored, the church remains a vital source of counsel to the nations: “In our time, how persistently are told that the Church must keep out of politics! It is one thing, the men of the world say, for the Church to enunciate general principles, it is another thing for the Church to speak specifically with respect to any situation.” Likewise, in the New Testament example of Paul, the church speaks powerfully to the nation through the “parable” of his journey as a prisoner of Rome. Faced with rocks threatening to destroy his vessel, Paul called the sailors to reject self-preservation and to choose solidarity with others. Similarly, Christians proclaim God’s truth to the newly forming nations:

It was Paul who held the ship together. Here is a role which the Church has to play again and again. How much has depended, and how much still depends on the little communities of Christians among the new nations of Asia and Africa, to preserve these nations from the fissiparous tendencies of group selfishness! And how big has been the price which was paid when the Church in any land failed the nation at this point?

114 Niles, Upon the Earth, 250.
115 Niles, The Power at Work, 58.
116 Niles, The Power at Work, 58.
117 Niles, The Power at Work, 59; cf. “God used the nations to carry Israel towards its destiny” (Niles, The Power at Work, 63). Decades after Niles’s death (and in the wake of the heavy toll of a civil war), Rasiah concludes: “Church organizations, alone or along with certain NGOs, and the Government are making every effort at resettlement and rehabilitation of the war-ravaged zones. Christianity seems better equipped in many ways than other religions to
Niles’s critical association of church and nation certainly garnered criticism. Westerners at mid-century were increasingly uncomfortable with theologies of the church tied so closely to the interests of emerging, non-Western nations. Tensions among the churches in Africa, India, and Japan each served as examples of brimming conflict. Objecting to the rampant unwillingness of Western powers to divest themselves of “authority and status” in the “younger” (majority world) churches, Niles’s response is incisive and forceful:

There is no escaping the fact that today, in the lands of the younger churches, there is a pressure to see the Church established in each nation-state as a church that is nation-wide and as, therefore, the means by which that nation can participate in God’s total will for His Church in the world. Nor is there any escaping the fact that many influences in the older churches desire to arrest this development. Where caution is expressed against attempting to identify “the nations” in the Bible with the modern nation-states, that caution must be heeded; for it is so easy to slip from a concern to build a church for the nation into a desire to build a church of the nation. But where the caution expressed is the result of apprehension in the churches of the West at the probable consequences for their life . . . in Asia and Africa, that caution is unfortunate. It is unfortunate too that as long as there were only Western nations to reckon with, nations were not Christianly suspect, but that they have become suspect now because new nations have come to birth which are free of Western dominance.\(^\text{118}\)

Niles suspected that the root of Western distrust of strong ties between church and nation in the Southern hemisphere stemmed not from theological insight, but prejudicial distrust of the younger churches. For Niles, the point remains: “‘God loved the world’ and not just people, the Gospel is for the redemption of the world and not just for the salvation of souls.”\(^\text{119}\)

Throughout, church and nations bear the marks of mutuality. Niles could affirm Karl Barth’s conviction that the Christian community is a gift to the nations: “The true community of Jesus Christ is the society in which it is given to men to see and understand the world as it is, to accept solidarity with it, and to

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\(^{118}\)Niles, *Upon the Earth*, 256.  
\(^{119}\)Niles, *Upon the Earth*, 256.
be pledged and committed to it.”

Yet Niles also maintains that the nations both benefit from the proclamation of the church and call the church to its Lord. God has used the world again and again to “bring back the Church to Him” and ultimately “administers the gospel to the Church” by “calling for obedience” and “chastising it in its disobedience”:

> When a church has to carry the cross, that cross is fashioned for it by the world. When a church is to be as a city set on a hill, it is by the world that the situation is contrived. It is within the movements of world history that the missionary movement is set, it is through the pressures of that history that the Church discerns its times and seasons.

The Christian church and the nations enjoy a mutual relationship under a common Lord: “even as the world administers the gospel to the Church, so the Church declares the gospel to the world and makes that gospel effective in the lives of men. For that which is promised to the Church is for the world also.”

The church “makes available for men God’s presence among them” and thereby serves as a visible symbol to the world. The church works as a visible institution: it reminds the world of God’s word and law, invites the world “to His bounty,” and addresses the nations as a living family invited to partake in God’s own life.

Looking to the future, Niles envisioned churches that reflect the full range of local, national, and global concerns. The truly united church requires fully indigenous churches that are each unique: “national in its expression, spontaneous in its growth and local in its colouring.” To accomplish this end, the West must give space for the younger churches of the world to develop. In the West, Christianity was tied closely to the formation of nations, and this allowed the ideals of Christ to gradually shape the outlook of the nation. But the younger churches require a different model to reach their maturity: “in the East the

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120Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, IV.3.2:780.
121Niles, *The Power at Work*, 77, 64.
122Niles, *The Power at Work*, 64; cf. the relationship between warring nations, who “find that the nation which wins becomes responsible for the ongoing life of the nation that loses” (*The Power at Work*, 67).
Church as a Christian institution has to be nationalized.” The earliest converts in India and Ceylon, for example, were outcasts. These individuals had few, positive cultural experiences to bring into the church, and the missionaries were largely opposed to the remnants of their heritage and social order. Spontaneity and openness to the dynamic movement of the Spirit were out of the question: the missionary “had brought a pot-plant to flower in a strange land and he could not trust it to the indigenous soil.” Gradually, alienation among the people set in, even within their original communities and nation.

National unity thereby required new patterns, Niles thought. Devolution might be encouraged through new models of leadership, organizational structure, and indigenous forms of community such as the then-emerging ashram movement in Asia. In this, Niles reflected the mid-century optimism of the World Council of Churches and the aims of church leaders such as Henry Pitney Van Dusen (1897–1975) and Daniel J. Fleming (1877–1969). The younger churches must emphasize local control of the ministry, active involvement among the laity, and the eventual reconciliation of the various denominational bodies of the nation under a single authority: “In every land the Christian people in that land are called to win their nation to allegiance to Jesus Christ. Methodist and Baptist and Presbyterian and Anglican in Ceylon belong together as those bound by a call to a common task.” Resistance would continue, as Niles knew from his work with the World Council of Churches. Many denominations—including many among the Methodists—would sooner advocate for the visible unity of world Methodism before the union of the

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125 Niles, Sir, We Would See Jesus, 96–97.
126 Niles, Sir, We Would See Jesus, 97.
128 Niles’s optimism regarding the possibilities for local leadership and contextual theology belongs to a larger, underexplored set of relationships between Niles and other leaders in the World Council of Churches (see, for example, John A Radano, ed., Celebrating a Century of Ecumenism: Exploring the Achievements of International Dialogue [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012]). Van Dusen, for instance, admonished missionary agencies in the wake of war to press on in devolution, which the war had accelerated to the benefit of the younger churches: “It would be worse than tragic if the gains of wartime achievement were to be cast away and attempts made to revert to the old order” (Henry Pitney Van Dusen, “The World Mission Today,” in Christian World Mission, ed. William K. Anderson [Nashville: Commission on Ministerial Training, The Methodist Church, 1946], 254).
129 Niles, The Preacher’s Calling to be Servant, 54; Niles, “The Church’s Call to Mission and Unity,” 245.
Christian churches within a nation. Yet, Niles believed that the emphasis on global denominational unity too frequently overshadowed the national unity of the churches and raised once again the specter of Western imperialism.

Niles came to recognize the ways of God in the history of human political affairs. Shifts in history marked “a synchronization of events” that revealed divine action. There could be little doubt that the work of missionaries in Africa corresponded to the ascension of Africa’s place in international relations or that the union of churches in South India accompanied the emergence of political independence in the nation. These events echoed the long history of God’s activity in the world, “no less significant than the synchronization” of momentous events that Israel faced as Egypt and Babylon “were at the height of their rivalry.”

Niles intimated, but stopped just short of, a bold declaration: national unity portends global unity in church and society.

**Conclusion**

D. T. Niles’s Spirit-ecclesiology, simultaneously Wesleyan and Barthian, reorients the center of God’s redemptive work in the world. For Niles, the Christian church is a community freed to mutual relationships in Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit. Niles’s lifelong commitment to active participation in the local, regional, and global ministries of Christian churches reflected his witness to the Spirit’s activity in diverse ways throughout the world. Redeeming local cultures, renewing all creation, and promoting the unity of nations, the Spirit pervades the earth and draws all living things to the love of Christ.

Niles found the center of all life in Jesus Christ. As a pastor-evangelist, his devotion to the gospel was unyielding. Yet, as a minority in two senses—a Tamil and a Christian—Niles related to those around him with respect and dignity. Like John Wesley, Niles developed a practical theology, and he was troubled by the way that some theologians eliminated mystery and complexity from theological systems, losing contact with diverse forms of life, culture, and human existence in the process. He believed that Christian theologians, at their best, recognize the legitimate questions prompted by the frayed edges of human experience. Systematic theologians must ever remain humble listeners to the experiences of others.

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131 Niles, *That They May Have Life*, 75.
Niles’s ecclesiology emerged from a position of vulnerability. He knew the challenges that often accompany minority status in a nation: persecution, government disruption of educational institutions, and distrust from those committed to different systems of belief. Niles’s silent nod to Karl Barth, who had lived a life largely insulated from non-Western religious pluralism, speaks volumes. Niles’s conception of the Spirit’s work in creation reflects his experience living in a nation of predominantly Buddhist and Hindu citizens. His work as an evangelist was not an effort to encourage church participation among a nominally Christian population, but rather (what is more demanding) to promote a recognition of the uniqueness of Jesus Christ within a pluralist society. Reflecting on the nature and mission of the church in such a context led Niles to alternate theological models. He saw God’s work in the questions that his non-Christian neighbors asked him, in the ways that God had provided for widows and orphans through the work of local churches, and in the lasting witness of Christian faithfulness within an often hostile community.

Niles’s theology challenges Wesleyan and Methodist Christians to embrace the diversity of global Christianity today, especially when prejudice and parochialism threaten the unity of the churches. Niles believed that prejudice was integral to the Hindu caste system. He saw similar patterns of injustice, however, when he encountered churches in North America in the 1950s and 1960s. His words in The Preacher’s Calling to be Servant continue to resonate in the early twenty-first century: “To-day, when we fellowship with one another, we seek out the people we like either because they hold the same theology, or belong to the same class, or have the right colour. The result is not a Church but a mutual admiration society.” Being church, for Niles, meant rejecting barriers that diminish common fellowship and supporting the formation of true community.

Parochialism, nonetheless, continues to challenge the Christian churches—Methodists no less than other denominations. A non-Western Christian of worldwide admiration, Niles challenged perennial Western hegemony, defended the right of “younger nations” to determine their own course, and supported the integrity of non-Western churches. Even as Christians trust the

132Niles, The Preacher’s Calling to be Servant, 29. Ironically, Niles’s commitment to common action and shared mission in the face of divisions stands against any undue interest in his theology as a Methodist: “It has always seemed strange to me that... a Methodist in England feels more closely bound to a Methodist in Ceylon [than] to the Anglican next door. After all, the Christians in a country have to do together what God has intended that they shall do together” (“The Church’s Call to Mission and Unity,” 245).
Spirit of God to guide the path of the church in every age, so, too, we must trust (with Niles) the Spirit to attend the way of the church in every place. In many respects, the situation today has been reversed. Instead of encouraging the need for global Christians to determine their own course independent of Western interests, perhaps today Western Christians must now allow churches from the majority world to inform the Christian identity of our common church. As Niles insisted, the Christian church belongs to the Lord, and we must learn to live together in unity.¹³³

About the Author

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¹³³ I am grateful to Edith Blomhofer, Roger Lundin, Vincent Bacote, and two anonymous reviewers of Methodist Review for comments on previous drafts of this article.