Holy Defect: Metaphors and the Quest for the Perfectly Flawed Missionary

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Abstract: Ideal missionaries are best understood not in terms of perfection--- power, giftedness, or flawlessness. Rather, their recognized flaws and weaknesses may be what best mark their effectiveness in ministry. Such "flawedness" in this paper is not primarily moral in nature, although it can include moral failings, but rather the failure to meet human-created standards of perfection. The flaws of ministers and mankind as a whole will be explored in a, perhaps paradoxically, positive fashion. This perspective will be supported, in part, through exploring metaphors--- from both the Bible and pastoral theology. Metaphors explored include Wounded Healer, Circus Clown, Wise Fool, Thorn in the Flesh, Penitent Publican, and Jars of Clay. All of these suggest a positive role for flaws or perceived weaknesses in ministry and the Christian life. It is hoped that an exploration of these metaphors will help those in cross-cultural ministry be more effective in their work. In part, effectiveness may come through the missionary giving him/herself grace in areas identified as falling short of perfection. Additionally, he or she may recognize that flaws could actually help the missionary bridge the cultural and ministerial gap with the respondent.

What would make a missionary ideal or perfect? Churches, mission agencies, and individual supporters are likely to have a perfect or ideal missionary in mind by which they evaluate living missionaries or mission candidates. This imaginary missionary likely does not sin and makes few, if any, missteps. He or she almost certainly doesn't have doubts regarding faith in, or the goodness of, God. The same perfect missionary probably overcomes with relative ease struggles with health concerns, family responsibilities, and work-life balance. Such an ideal missionary, in the minds of people, might be described as flawless. With this as a paragon, real people who struggle with the real world may, in some contexts, be deemed as not up to the task of missions. (Lim 2002, 87-)

This idealized missionary does not exist, but would such a person even be an ideal or perfect missionary? What if the perfect missionary has flaws--- defects, weaknesses, and failings? Perhaps such flaws could be seen as part of what makes the individual "perfect." This paper seeks to identify "perfection" in terms of being flawed. To get to that perhaps controversial view, we will start by exploring perfection from a theological standpoint and then move to how we as humans tend to perceive such an abstract quality within our very human context.

Perfection and Metaphor

Be perfect as your Father in heaven is perfect (Matthew 5:48)

Be perfect. This verse is quite a challenge, but it is mitigated by two interpretative issues. First is the question of the Greek word used, *teleios.* While often translated as "perfect," it has a broad range of meanings. Aristotle, several centuries before the penning of the Gospel of Matthew, gave three understandings of the term as used in Classical Greek. One suggests something that is unimprovable. This is most in line with the English concept of perfection. The other definitions suggest (a) completeness- needing nothing additional—or (b) being fully functional- achieving the purpose for which it was created (Aristotle n.d., V:16). Second is the added ambiguity found in the parallel passage, Luke 6:26. In this verse, the word used is not *teleios*, but *oiktirmos.* This term better translates as compassionate. If both Greek terms inform the same original message, Jesus may be intimating something very different from our concept of perfect. Jonathan Pennington understands *teleios* in terms of "wholehearted orientation to God," rather than a state of faultlessness. (2017, 205; See also McKnight, 2017) According to Lewis Sperry Chafer, terms commonly translated in the Bible as "perfection" or "perfect" are used in seven different ways. The first two relate to the ultimate perfecting of the individual or of the church in heaven, coming the closest to the common-sense understanding of the English term "perfection." The other five uses do not suggest this– perfection is either progressive, limited, or in some other way less superlative, such as maturity or sincerity. (Chafer 1969, 282-284)

As human beings, we struggle with the concept of perfection as we tend to use the term. We lack experience with perfect things. It is quite likely that we have never seen, heard, or touched a perfect thing in our entire lives. And if we did, how would we know it was perfect? We might say that God is perfect, but this has to be a statement of faith since we are simply not competent to evaluate God. Our own lack of perfection, lack of experience with perfection, and our inability to identify perfection if we did experience it necessitate approaching the concept indirectly. One such approach is through metaphor- linking the abstract quality to a more concrete object. Paul Ricoeur identifies metaphors as not being figurative, but literal, drawing meaning out of the absurdity of equating two completely different things. (McGaughey 1988, 419-420; Steinhart 2001, 227-228).

Ethics and Aesthetics

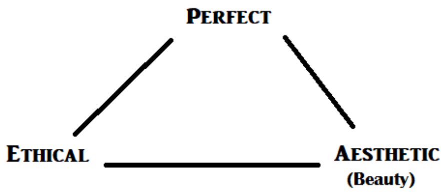
The Bible suggests relating the abstract quality of perfection with the somewhat more concrete, although subjective, quality of beauty or aesthetics. One aesthetic model is that of "Superficial Flawlessness." The following are some things that are described as perfect or ideal, utilizing this aesthetic.

Ideal/Perfect	Without	Passage (NIV)
Church	Stain, Wrinkle, Blemish	Ephesians 5:27
Sacrificial Animal	Defect	Exodus 12:5 (and many more)
Child of God	Spot	II Peter 3:14
Christ	Blemish	Hebrews 9:14
Priest	Defect, Disfigurement	Leviticus 21:17-23

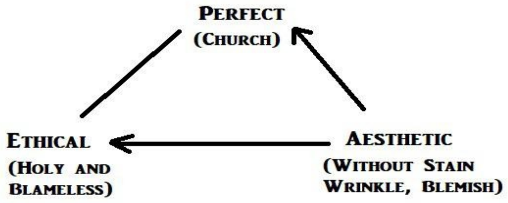
Additionally, false teachers are described in II Peter 2:13 as "blots" and "blemishes."

These blemishes vary. In the case of a sacrificed animal or a priest, these are very literal, and often superficial defects. Some are less superficial, such as lameness or blindness. For the rest, the term is strictly figurative. However, in all of these, perfection is addressed metaphorically. The superficial ideal says little to nothing about what is inside. While it is the character that matters, the imagery helps people grasp an abstraction through something more concrete. Scripture, however, in no way reifies the metaphor, as if superficial flawlessness speaks to the actual perfection of the subject. Jesus points this out when referring to some of the religious leaders as "whitewashed tombs"- looking beautiful (perfect) on the outside but decayed and unclean within (Matthew 23:27). The metaphor purposefully looks only on what may be perceived externally, due to our limitations. I Samuel 16:7 also reminds readers of the inadequacy of our superficial perspective. Unblemished does not make something perfect- it just makes imagining perfection in some sense easier. God values more what people are unable to see and is not fooled by what things look like on the outside. The temple and tabernacle were created artistically to show beauty, giving a bit of a hint to God and perfection; and yet no amount of architectural beauty could make God overlook the sinfulness of the people and maintain God's presence, as described in Ezekiel 8-10.

A metaphor is a symbol. Following Piercean semiotics, a symbol has three components: the object (the item symbolized), the form of the symbol or representamen, and the meaning formed in the mind (interpretant). (Atkin 2023) If perfection is the abstract object, then an unblemished animal is the concrete object or representamen. This maps in the mind to a certain purity, or ethical goodness- the interpretant. In other words, the aesthetic (physical symmetry and spotlessness- "beauty") is mapped to moral/ethical purity or guiltlessness to inform the broader understanding of that which is perfect or ideal.



This linkage is quite explicit in Ephesians 5:25-27, where a bride is used metaphorically to describe "*a glorious church, without stain or wrinkle or any such blemish, but holy and blameless.*" The aesthetic and ethical languages are combined.



Artists have joined the discussion on aesthetics from a slightly different direction- the question of the relationship between beauty and flawlessness (Kadaev 2015, 87). Is beauty, perfection, and flawlessness inherently linked? Nikolai Berdyaev believed that the disconnect between the artist's desire for perfection and the imperfection of the resulting artwork creates a sort of "creative tragedy" (Kadaev 2015, 88). This inability to achieve perfection may be, in some sense, tragic, but it also motivates their efforts. Perfection, as a goal, is important both in art and in our lives because it is enticing but appears to be just out of reach.

But then is flawless beauty a good metaphor for perfection? Clearly, it has some value since it is used in the Bible. But there are problems, as Jesus had noted through His image of whitewashed tombs. Another problem also alluded to earlier is whether we can even recognize perfection if we saw it. The Greek ideal of beauty is tied to the Platonic philosophy of forms; but forms, if they can be said to exist in any sense, are not accessible to humans. Imagine a very good fly swatter. Now imagine a “perfect” fly swatter- one that in no way could ever be improved upon. Such a fly swatter would be a perfect design and flawless in its manufacture. Perhaps a master craftsman could design and construct such a fly swatter, but we would never know it. The first problem is, what criteria would make a fly swatter “perfect”? Second, if the craftsman created the perfect fly swatter, how would he even know, and how would we recognize it? Since ideal forms cannot be directly perceived, the standard for perfection (or aesthetic beauty) is unavailable for judgment, and the imperfection of a creation becomes, in essence, an act of faith. Over the centuries, however, there began to be a growing belief that beauty is not of necessity linked to flawlessnes; and if that is so, perhaps perfection is also not always linked to flawlessness. More on this later.

Another Aesthetic in the Bible

In the Bible, superficial flawlessness is not the only aesthetic standard for beauty. Another is described as an “aesthetic of natural abundance.” This term follows the thinking of Gerald Downing, who recognizes that natural abundance is not merely a utilitarian appreciation but an aesthetic evaluation as well. (Downing 2003, 193-195) The Israelite nation was primarily an agrarian society and so was tied to the land economically. But there is an aesthetic aspect as well. As Yeshua Ben Sirach stated, “*The eye desires grace and beauty, but the green shoots of grain more than either.”* (Sirach, 40:22) The Hebrew Bible has much appreciation of natural abundance. God’s greatness is illustrated in Psalm 65:9-13 through a well-watered land of flocks and grain. An ideal person is also identified through the metaphor of natural abundance. Below are a few examples:

Ideal Person	**Characterized as**	**Reference**
Righteous Person	Prosperous, fruitful tree	Psalm 1
Just Person	Well-watered Garden	Isaiah 58:11
Person of Faith	Stong, fruitful tree	Jeremiah 17:7-8
One Who Abides in Christ	Fruitful branch of a grapevine	John 15

Berleant and Carlson note that this sort of “environmental aesthetics” has a quality to it quite unlike an aesthetics based on unchanging, flawless perfection. While Greek philosophers may idealize the static, unmoved mover, here the ideal is seen in the form of living abundance that has an “engaging, inclusive, dynamic character.” (Downing 2003, 199)

Sometimes, the aesthetics of static flawlessness and of natural abundance are combined. Images of the eternal state have both. Revelation 21:9-27 describes Heaven, the abode of God, as a great city- a flawless, beautiful artifice. On the other hand, Revelation 22:1-3 and Ezekiel 47 describe it in terms of natural and dynamic abundance. These two visions do not compete with each other, but instead both point to something ineffable- wonderful beyond our own experience.

Beautiful Holy Defect

In the eighteenth century, common views on beauty began to be challenged by J. G. Sulzer and Immanuel Kant, who believed that beauty did not necessarily imply perfection. However, even with Kant, there is still a serious attempt to see beauty as an objective quality, not simply subjective, so a form of idealism persisted. (Rueger 2008, 535-536)

But can we see perfection or that which is ideal in ways that challenge traditional views of beauty? Can one see perfection or beauty, paradoxically, in its failure to achieve flawlessness- its defects? Consider John Ruskin's comments in the 19th century:

> "*...imperfection is in some sort essential to all that we know of life. It is the sign of life in a mortal body, that is to say, of a state of progress and change. Nothing that lives is, or can be, rigidly perfect; part of it is decaying, part nascent. ... All things are literally better, lovelier, and more beloved for the imperfections which have been divinely appointed, that the law of human life may be Effort, and the law of human judgment, Mercy. Accept this then for a universal law, that neither architecture nor any other noble work of man can be good unless it be imperfect…"* (Ruskin 1853, 171-172)

Ruskin identifies something Christian in the "divinely appointed" imperfection, and this agrees with the Japanese concept of *wabi sabi*. *Wabi Sabi* is a Japanese expression for an aesthetic viewpoint. The term "*Wabi*" refers to hermitic existence in nature. It became seen as beauty identified in the simple and natural. "*Sabi*" means cold or desolate and came to be seen as beauty identified in decay. (Ishikawa 2016, 23, 27) The combination of terms grew to describe a perspective of beauty in terms of three overarching principles: transience, impermanence, and imperfection. (White 2016) In this context, 'imperfection' most likely means containing flaws. Thus, beauty in the aesthetic of *wabi sabi* rejects a static, flawless ideal. A photograph of a person with evidence of aging—laugh lines, crow's feet, scars, and more—is evaluated as more beautiful than one in which all such 'defects' are removed by cosmetics, airbrushing, digital manipulation, or plastic surgery.

With *kintsukuroi*, or "golden repair," an art form driven by the aesthetic of *wabi sabi,* gold lacquer is used to accentuate rather than hide imperfections in pottery. (Handa 2013, 231-232) A porcelain dish that is broken is repaired and restored for use through this method. The cracks are widened and then filled with a lacquer that has gold dust mixed in. This repair makes the porcelain functional again, with large golden bands along the crack seams. When done well, the result is often deemed quite beautiful. The repair demonstrates the skill of the artisan and can actually increase the value of the object. Beauty is seen in celebrating its damage rather than hiding it. (Richman-Abdou 2024)

Biblical Perspective on Beauty, Decay, and Defect

Can *wabi sabi,* having developed out of the philosophy of Zen Buddhism, reveal something of value in Christian theology? Darrell Whiteman has noted the potential, through interreligious dialogue, for the Christian to gain insight, "so that the Gospel itself will be understood in ways the universal church has neither experienced nor understood before, thus expanding our understanding of the kingdom of God" (Whiteman 1997, 4). To understand how perfection may be envisioned in this way, one might try working backwards- first identifying some things commonly recognized by Christians as perfect. These might include (pre-Fall) Creation, God, and Heaven. Earlier, Heaven was already shown as perfect in its static, flawless structure, as well as its wild and natural abundance. Now, creation, as described in the first two chapters of

Genesis, and God as revealed in Jesus Christ, will be considered.

The first two chapters of Genesis describe the universe created by God as being very good. This goodness, in all likelihood, fits at least two of Aristotle's definitions for perfection. First, God's creation was complete, at least in terms of that stage in the ‘life’ of the universe, and so God could rest. Second, God's creation achieved its purpose for being. It is hard to say whether the world was unimprovable. However, many early Reformers did link perfection of a Christian to the original state of mankind, the Imago Dei, following the thinking of Augustine that Christ perfects us by restoring us to our pre-Fall state. (Pannenberg 1985, 50-51)

God's creation was changing, not static. The light and darkness changed in a predictable pattern. Presumably, animals reproduced after their own kind even before the Fall, since plants already were, as evidenced by the production of seed-bearing fruits. The imagery here is an aesthetic of natural abundance rather than static flawlessness. Osborn notes that God’s message to Adam and Eve that disobedience would lead to death suggests that they were not unfamiliar with the concept of death. Similarly, the punishment that suffering would be multiplied in childbearing suggests that they were also familiar with suffering. (Osborn 2014, 36) At the very least, there was cellular death before the Fall. It is hard to imagine how the first humans, and other animals, could eat the fruits of the trees without killing the living cells in those fruits. We as humans can barely live unless we are covered with layers of dead skin cells. For fruit trees to produce fruit, they produce petals that die, fruits that fall and decay into the soil or broken down by animal digestion, and seeds in which the vast majority will die without successfully growing to create the next generation of the plant. If the pre-Fall creation was perfect, then it was so with a dynamic wildness to it that includes cycles of life, death, and decay.

It is a Christian statement of faith that Jesus was perfect- perfect God, perfect man. But could one say that Jesus was perfect if he was only perfect part of the time? Presumably not, but if Jesus was perfect at all times, he was perfect as a baby who could not speak or walk. Jesus would be perfect as he “*grew in wisdom and stature, and in favor with God and man*” (Luke 2:52; See also Luke 2:40). Jesus would also have been perfect while in a physically mutilated state on the cross. Finally, Jesus would be perfect in his scarred, resurrected state.

If that which is perfect or ideal can be seen in terms of the pre-Fall Creation and Jesus Christ, then this condition remains while certain aspects are transient, incomplete, and have defects. Such perfection could be said to have a beauty that is not found in static flawlessness. Perhaps such a perfection (or beauty) can be seen in a long-used piece of pottery, beautifully mended, or in a young child full of life and potential, becoming who she was created to be. Perhaps it is a man waiting at the Pool of Bethesda, crippled, but exactly who and where he was meant to be at that moment. Perhaps it is seen in a person near the end of life —wrinkled and scarred by decades of challenges—persevering to the end, having finished the course, keeping the faith. And perhaps it is seen in a missionary- weary, scarred, flawed, and faithfully enduring.

Metaphors of Defect and Perfection in Christian Life and Ministry

This writer believes the previous section is necessary because it is tempting to balk theologically and intellectually at seeing the ideal in terms of defect or brokenness. This next part is necessary because even if one can embrace something cognitively, there can still be a tendency to balk viscerally. *Bloom’s taxonomy of learning* notes the importance of the affective domain, with the need to move towards valuing, organizing, and internalizing new ideas in oneself (Clark 2015). Symbols/metaphors and stories do this well because we are people of stories. A majority of the Bible is narrative in genre, compelling us to connect to and interpret the abstract (or ineffable) through that which is concrete. Symbols and stories are necessary for our theology

(Steffen 2018, ch. 5, 6). Propositional statements may be intellectually satisfying, but they often fail to impact on a deeper level (Baloian 2016, 56ff).

There are a number of metaphors that point positively toward defect or incompleteness in the Christian life. Listing all of them is certainly beyond both the scope of this work and the capacity of this writer. The attempt here is simply to suggest that a perceived defect may point to or even create something perfect or ideal in a Christian, and especially a Christian missionary. Of the ones listed here, half are explicitly Biblical, while the others have their roots in the pastoral care movement and its partner, pastoral theology. As Doug Dickens has noted, it is in pastoral theology where there is a lot of exploration of the question, "What does it mean to be fully human?" (Munson 2020, 16). Since missionaries are human, the insights of pastoral theology should be relevant in missions as well.

Symbol	**Defect**	**"Perfection"**
Wounded Healer	Injured, Scarred	Empathy
Circus Clown	Bumbling, Comical	Connection
Wise Fool	Despised, Laughingstock	Counsel
Thorn in the Flesh	Weak	(God's) Power
Penitent Publican	Sinful	Humility, Dependence
Jars of Clay	Mundane, Fragile	(God's) Glory

Consider the table above for those to be examined. If the term perfection is still seen as problematic, then perhaps one may find 'ideal' more appropriate. The ideal missionary will have certain qualities that may be seen as defects or failings.

Wounded Healer

One of the most well-known images of pastoral care and counseling is *"wounded healer,"* first coined by Carl Jung as an archetype in psychology (Sharp 1991, "Wounded Healer"). It was popularized in pastoral theology primarily through Henri Nouwen (Nouwen 1972). Of course, the image is seen long before Jung and Nouwen in the description of the Suffering Servant. Isaiah 53:4-5 states,

> *Surely he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows; yet we esteemed him stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted. But he was pierced for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his wounds we are healed.*

Christians see this description as pointing forward to the life and mission of Jesus.

Henri Nouwen recalls a story from the Babylonian Talmud (Sanhedrin 98a) of a conversation between the

Prophet Elijah and a rabbi. The rabbi asks Elijah when the Messiah will come. Elijah responds that the rabbi can ask him himself. He should go to the city gate, and among the poor and injured, he will find the Messiah. The Messiah will be among them, caring for his own bandaged wounds. He can be identified from among them by this: unlike the others, the Messiah will remove, clean, and redress his bandages one at a time (as opposed to all of them at the same time) so that he is always available to help someone in need without delay. (Nouwen 1972, 83-84)

Nouwen suggests neither that the wounds in themselves make one a healer nor that exposing one's wounds to others aids in the healing. Showing off one's scars and injuries, whether physical, emotional, mental, or spiritual, may be more morbid than helpful. Rather, woundedness should be recognized as a part of our universal experience as humans and accepted without shame. This places us with those who struggle, much as the Messiah described above.

A clear sense of one's woundedness should lead one to empathize with those hurting, rather than drive one to compare who is more injured. Every missionary is deeply wounded and damaged. This is neither a point of pride nor of shame. Some missionaries may be tempted to feel pity for those they serve. As commendable as that may be as a response to the suffering of others, it can also come from a place of perceived superiority. It is out of our universal humanity and brokenness that missionaries can best empathize- the wounded missionary changing bandages one at a time to be available to reach out to others in need.

Circus Clown

The Circus Clown is another metaphor from pastoral theology, exploring the pastoral person through the analogy of a traditional circus (Dykstra 2005, ch. 8; Faber 1971, 81ff). Today, clowns are often portrayed as scary, largely due to modern storytellers such as Stephen King. This has been done to shock, much like making a doll or toy a source of malevolence in the horror genre. Traditionally, however, clowns in a circus would be entertaining and welcoming. Consider someone, perhaps a child visiting a traditional circus, entering the big tent. She enters in awe of the spectacle, full of entertainers doing things that seem beyond the capability of mere humans. Some fly through the air. Others lift, throw, and balance in amazing ways. Others can control wild beasts. Still others do amazing tricks through means that seem nothing less than real magic. As the child watches in amazement at the "miracles" around her, another group enters the tent. These are the clowns. They seem to have no skills that overwhelm the mind. While the others are performing in the center of the ring or high in the tent, the clowns move around the peripheries, greeting and connecting with the crowd. They serve as the bridge between the expert and the broader crowd. While the circus performers can be scary with wild animals, swords, and explosions, the clowns appear harmless and inviting.

The metaphor of the circus clown relates to the pastoral person, but more especially to a hospital chaplain. For a patient or the patient's family members, the hospital can be a daunting and alien place- full of equipment and procedures not well understood, run by people with knowledge and skills that seem beyond human capacity. Enter the chaplain. She comes in with few skills... and certainly not the highly specialized ones of the medical professionals. The medical staff often appear to talk down to the patient, but the chaplain communicates eye-to-eye and heart-to-heart with the sick and their families. The medical staff normally maintain distanced objectivity in their interactions. The chaplain interacts relationally and connects with them through their social, spiritual, and emotional struggles. Further, hospital personnel use blades, syringes, powerful drugs, and more, in contrast with the chaplain, who appears to be the opposite of dangerous. The chaplain, regardless of whether serving in a hospital, jail, or military, is accepted by the system but is never truly part of that system. The failure of chaplains to be experts is, paradoxically, what makes them good at what they do- connecting the (somewhat) cold institution and the one in need.

A missionary is not so different from a chaplain. The missionary bridges a gap often greater than that between medical staff and patient. The missionary brings the message of God to a new place, a new people. A new faith and culture impinging on a community is a scary thing. In most places, the online world brings a glitzy, media-driven Christianity to new places, and this exaggerated, sanitized, and stylized expression of the faith is likely to give no confidence to a non-believer who might be considering the cost of following Christ. It is the missionary in his or her radical ordinariness---faith lived out in a community without spotlights---that may bring the greatest connection. Connection and trust may be more easily made through ordinariness than through hypercompetency.

Wise Fool

The wise fool draws from the image of a court jester. His role was often far more than simply an entertainer. In addition to music, jokes, and stories to entertain, he could say what generally could not be said in court. He had what has been termed "jester's privilege," throwing around insults and jokes at the expense of those inside or outside of court. It was acceptable- he was a fool after all. He could be the bearer of bad news to the king. The risk of "killing the messenger" was greatly reduced since clearly a fool cannot be blamed for saying and doing foolish things before the king.

And yet, he was not a fool, as Sandra Billington has noted, but an "artificial fool" as opposed to a "natural fool." The artificial fool mimics some aspects of a natural (or "real") fool to be entertaining. As an artificial fool, however, he is required to exhibit great wit and intelligence (Billington 1984, 16-). The jester would be a commoner, thus providing a perspective that contrasts greatly with the other voices of the court. Additionally, royalty, as is common with leaders of all sorts, would tend to surround themselves with the obsequious, so the jester could often be a rare independent voice, able to speak the truth that is otherwise left unsaid in the ruler's presence.

We may see an example of a jester in the Bible in David. I Samuel 16 relates the story of Saul bringing David into the court. Saul appeared to be struggling with fear, anger, paranoia, or depression. Seeking to calm his mind, verse 18 states a suggestion by a servant:

> "*I have seen a son of Jesse of Bethlehem who knows how to play the lyre. He is a brave man and a warrior. He speaks well and is a fine-looking man. And the LORD is with him.*"

David's songs, appearance, speech, and wisdom lightened Saul's spirit. Noting that Samuel had by this time left King Saul, David may also have taken on a prophetic role to some extent, saying what needed to be said in the courts, utilizing his "speaking well" and the belief that "the LORD is with him." Perhaps his time in the court of King Saul also gave him skills to feign madness while in Gath (I Samuel 21:13).

In the austere halls of a modern hospital filled with the latest technology and the fruits of the innovations of modern science, a person walking up to patients carrying little more than the symbols of ancient faith may seem incongruous. Writers have noted the role is not unlike the commoner jester in the courts of royalty. (Campbell 2005, 94-; Capps 2005, 108-)

Yet the metaphor may be far more applicable to a cross-cultural missionary. There is an audacity to immerse oneself, as a foreigner, in a different worldview and say that the people are, on some levels at least, wrong. Historically, a missionary may have been able to comfort himself in the rather delusional belief of cultural superiority or feel less out of place by the shelter of colonial powers. Today, however, godly wisdom is given without such crutches. Missionaries may find themselves much like Paul in the first century, invited by others to speak as much to hear what is novel and entertaining as to be enlightened, such as with the Areopagus in Acts 17. Here, as well as with Paul's conversations with Felix, Agrippa, and Drusilla, or John the Baptist before Herod Antipas, part of their ability to speak freely before those of regional/cultural power was their own powerlessness in that context. Paul describes his role in his missionary capacity in contrast to the members of the Corinthian church:

> "*We have been made a spectacle to the whole universe, to angels as well as to human beings. We are fools for Christ, but you are so wise in Christ! We are weak, but you are strong! You are honored, we are dishonored!*" (I Corinthians 4:9b-10).

This may be part of the strength of Paul. His seeming fearlessness to speak wherever he was did not come from being a great speaker. By his own admission, he was not. His fearlessness came, in part, from a willingness to be seen as weak and dishonored- a fool for Christ. A missionary can speak audaciously, in part, by being the awkward outsider- serving as the voice that says what needs to be said, risking being considered a fool in the process.

Thorn in the Flesh

> *Therefore, in order to keep me from becoming conceited, I was given a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan, to torment me. Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me. But he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me.* (II Corinthians 12:7b-9)

This passage describes a condition that Paul refers to as a "thorn in the flesh." Was this temptation, or guilt, or perhaps a physical malady? It is clear that Paul viewed it as a defect, and yet, without it, Paul is at risk of conceit. With it, God's power is demonstrated. This power is described as being "perfected" in Paul's weakness. Again, the exact meaning of perfected here is not fully clear. Regardless, God's power is demonstrated more ideally through Paul's defect.

Are all "thorns in the flesh" beneficial? Consider Samson. While artists commonly portray Samson as looking like a bodybuilder, it may well be that he was very ordinary in appearance, or even frail. If that was so, great feats of strength being accomplished by a man appearing completely incapable of said deeds would more clearly evidence divine empowerment. However, Samson's problem with anger management and sexual lust was a different matter. Could his struggles with anger and lust, through submission to God, become a demonstration of God's power? Perhaps, with St. Jerome being a possible example of this. Instead for Samson, lust and anger became tied to a more unfortunate metaphor- his "Achilles' Heel."

Missionaries will always have defects, and these defects can be used by the enemy to ruin their ministry. These same defects, however, have the potential to "perfect" their role by demonstrating divine empowerment to those who don't know God.

Penitent Publican

Luke 18:9-14 describes two men coming to pray- a Pharisee and a Publican (tax collector). The Pharisee thanks God for how righteous he was- a prayer that is little more than boasting. The tax collector, recognizing his own failures, confesses to God, pleading for mercy. Jesus made it clear that God exalts those who humble themselves rather than the braggart.

The defect of sinfulness on the part of the penitent publican led to his being forgiven and exalted by God. But the story points out more. The prelude to the story clarifies that it is a cautionary tale regarding those confident in their own righteousness who look down on others for their sinfulness. Both the Pharisee and the Publican have failures/defects. The difference is that one of them tried to hide or deny them, while the other freely confessed them before God. This brings back the idea of *kintsukuroi*- golden repair. Beauty is seen in emphasizing the defects with skillful repair. Both the Pharisee and the tax collector are damaged. Both are unrighteous. The Pharisee tries to hide and deny the damage. The tax collector, on the other hand, freely admits his brokenness and confesses to it openly. This humility and call for mercy are answered by God.

The Bible uses the term *eilikrineias* for purity, integrity, or sincerity. The term, though of uncertain etymology, seems to suggest a testing through the light or the warmth of the sun (Beekes 2010, 386). As such, it may point to deceptive ancient repairs of pottery using wax. This would make it similar to the Latin expression *sine cera,* "without wax," from which we get the term 'sincere.' The terms express the abstract with the concrete and mundane. Wax may be used to disguise faults in pottery. Heat or bright light will expose the deception. II Corinthians 2:17, Paul describes his sincerity (*eilikrineias)*, suggesting that he does not seek to hide his failings as do those who do ministry for personal gain.

Since we are all damaged by sin, having no damage is not an option. We can deceptively try to hide the damage. The other option can then be between revealing the damage (living with the chips and dings in one's life) or enduring with a repair that reveals the damage (like in *kintsokuroi).* The witness of missionaries to the necessity of Christ for others is made evident in demonstrating humility in their own dependence on Christ in their failings.

Jars of Clay

II Corinthians 4:6-7 states,

> *For God, who said, "Let light shine out of darkness," made his light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of God's glory displayed in the face of Christ. But we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us.*

There is a stark contrast between earthenware jars and the treasure of God's power and glory. The issue here is not a defect so much as contrast.

In Isaiah 53:2b, the Suffering Servant is described:

> *He had no beauty or majesty to attract us to him, nothing in his appearance that we should desire him.*

This is reinforced by the story of the capture of Jesus in Matthew 26. In it, Judas Iscariot identified him by a kiss. Jesus could not be identified by unique features. His physical ordinariness required him to be identified by a friend.

The imagery of the jar of clay not only expresses our ordinariness---what is more ordinary than an earthenware jar?---but probably also our fragility. We are strange and seemingly inappropriate vessels for God's image, glory, and blessing. This contrast again draws us back to humility since the value of the jar is not so much the jar itself but in what it contains and how it can serve its purpose. As Dag Hammarskjöld stated, "The pride of the cup is in the drink, its humility in the serving. What, then do its defects matter?"

(Hammarskjöld 1964, 95) A cup, like a jar, is valued in its role to serve. On the gravestone of William Carey are the words, “A wretched, poor, and helpless worm, On thy kind arms I fall.” (Find a Grave, ‘William Carey’). Such a language of debasement seems much more extreme than the language of mundanity of ‘earthen jars’ here. Perhaps it is more in line with the Penitent Publican. Still, the description points to a missionary who is not focused on his own glory but on God’s.

The Beautiful Defects of a Missionary

While the images/metaphors presented are often paradoxical, that does not mean that they are nonsensical. In fact, there is much in which they are consistent with our intuition. Hebrews 4:15 expresses Jesus as one who can empathize with us, being tempted like us and understanding our weakness. The suggestion is that one who is above temptation and weakness cannot serve as our “Great High Priest” as effectively. II Corinthians 1:3-7 makes it clear that the comfort we received from God in our struggles and suffering makes us more capable to comfort others. The Christian who has never suffered is likely to have little of value to share with “the rest of us.”

The leader who never struggles, the counselor who is above all temptations to fail, and the parent who has perfect children also point people away from God to some extent. The broken jar that has been “super-glued” together in a manner to try to hide its flaws fails to demonstrate the skill of the artisan nearly as clearly as one who works on turning the fractures, perhaps even accentuating the breaks, into the design. God, in His wisdom, may choose not to make defects disappear- make things like new. Sometimes He chooses to make things better than new.

This can be difficult. Churches and mission agencies may not see struggles and problems in missionary candidates’ lives as positive features. This is understandable. Problems back home (sexual, financial, emotional, and more) are at risk of becoming much greater problems when in a new cultural setting with different social constraints and less direct accountability. A possible answer to this is that defects are fine as long as they are only of the past- the missionary having had victory (or claimed victory) over them. Yet we learn that God was glorified in Paul’s struggles that were very much a part of his present experience. Jesus inspires not only in his resurrected and scarred body but also in crying out during his crucifixion, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”

This writer has held conversations with a number of missionaries who have expressed the struggle of having no one to talk to about their struggles. When asked about their supporters back home, they would say that they did not have that sort of relationship. They felt they could share “Praise God!” moments in their lives, but not the “My God, my God” moments, and much less the “Dark Night of the Soul” seasons. That is sad on a couple of levels. First, they do not receive the comfort that they need from others. Second, the supporters miss out on seeing the flaws and defects lived out in the missionaries they support. They don’t see the glory of God displayed in earthen vessels, God’s power evidenced in human frailty and failings.

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