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Theology for Asia

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INTRODUCTION

Asia is in a crucial stage of its history. Economic prosperity is bringing rapid development. On the one hand, a growing middle class is wallowing in material prosperity, while on the other hand, the staggering population growth and ecological disasters demand our urgent attention in the face of the poverty which confronts us.

What is happening outside the church is not to be taken lightly. The church cannot remain content with its own numerical growth or stability, and continue in its familiar otherworldly attitude. A theology that addresses Asia today should take into account not only God's dealings with us as his people within the church, but also discern God's dealings with the world. Some of us are uncomfortable with the thought of God having to deal directly with the world and hence one must quickly add that God's dealing should be primarily through the church.

SOME HINDRANCES

There have been some hindrances that have affected our ability to totally relate our theology to the world around us. And before commencing a discussion of some of the theological perspectives, it is necessary to list a few. Overcoming these will enable us to be faithful to God's fullest concerns for his widest purposes for the world.

1. Other-worldly attitudes that have been handed down to us and which have blinded us to all that the Bible teaches us.
2. An excessive concern for evangelism and church growth in terms of numbers and statistics has only weakened the witness of the church in the wider sense. We have not explored all that the church should be in the world today.
3. Individual agendas have obstructed the collective mission of the church. Evangelicalism has been the breeding ground for such agendas. These have been manifested both in theological positions and in action programmes.
4. There is still a fixed idea of theology, as if it were universal in its [p.366](#) content and therefore universal in its relevance. There are, without any doubt, some distinctives that are universal, viz. salvation through Jesus Christ, his death and resurrection etc., but I am referring to the implications of these facts and the reality of the church within each varying context.
5. As a result of the above there has been a lack of concern for the total biblical perspective. We seem satisfied with the limited sections of the Bible from where we define our positions.

Merely by listing these issues, we see how limited we have been, and the burden of this paper is to explore what the Bible has to say for our situation today as we break from these restrictions. We will be freeing ourselves in order to make our theology truly actualized within our context.

THE ASIAN CONTEXT

But even before we attempt to identify some of the dominant theological themes, we need to attempt to define the situation that confronts us in Asia today. In a changing Asia, we need to discern some factors that may help us to know our peculiar context.

1. Asia has attained economic prosperity. Some countries have been rich for a long time, while others are still attempting to find their identity within their situation of wealth.
2. Yet a large area of Asia is still pressured by poverty. Some of these countries that are gradually approaching the status of being rich, like India, are facing greater challenges with the issue of the poor. But associated with this is the fact that the continent continues to cope with a massive population and all the problems linked with this.
3. Although there is a growing facade of secular modernity, even post-modernity, there is underneath a core of a religious people who still cling to traditional values. And this still conditions the culture. The young people face the problem of a sub-culture that is totally alien to this core cultural context.
4. An even more acute problem is that Asian culture is still conditioned by its millennia of rich historical diversity, in fact, a complexity. India, for instance, has had the influence of the Greeks, the Moghuls, the English etc., and it is hard to identify one single cultural strand. Cultural factors are complex.
5. Asia faces an ecological catastrophe. The recent global gatherings have proved only one thing—the rich North is still depending on the resources in the poorer South, and much of Asia is there. Whatever agreements are reached are one sided, heavily tending toward the older exploitation that will help sustain a particular lifestyle much in need of review within a changing environment. Unfortunately, as Asia gets richer, its people are aping this lifestyle and thereby [p.367](#) creating the rich-poor divide within.

THEOLOGICAL THEMES

Our theological focus will therefore need to address these issues if we claim that our theology is at all relevant to our context.

1. For an effective theology, there should hardly be any doubt that the foremost need is for a sound and complete doctrine of God. This may sound presumptuous, or even passé, but needs to be stated. By complete I mean a doctrine that includes not only the transcendental understanding of God, as in Barth's theology, but also some very immanent and incarnational theologies that will make God accessible to and actualized within humanity.
2. Alongside this merging of the understanding of God's transcendental and immanent attributes, we need to see more serious consideration given to God's creational concerns alongside God's rederuptive activity for the world. Developing more boldly from God's creation is urgent if we are to reclaim our identity in a very real world within which 'we live and move and have our being'.
3. Alongside these concerns for a better understanding of God, we will need to place our trinitarian concerns. Our theology of the Trinity has thus far been heavily apologetic. Even if being apologetic has been a requisite, we have been fed with western approaches that argue our case for trinitarianism as purely factual rather than functional. In the religious framework that is peculiar to Asia, there are some religious facts which need not be argued. They need only to be stated. But having stated these, what is important is the function, implications and the outworkings

of these facts that need to be made known. The Trinity is key to the holding together of the present activity of the Holy Spirit along with the work of God and Jesus Christ of the biblical records. They work together and not separately.

4. A proper eschatological affirmation will be imperative. Once again our whole approach to eschatology has been very western with our students required only to affirm a particular position rather than to draw out implications for our immediate context. A totally futuristic eschatology with no present implications, of the kind that was encouraged alongside otherworldly attitudes, will not have any meaning within our context today. The new earth and new heaven must relate to the present earth, or else we will not be true to the biblical teaching of God's heart for his world today.

TWO MAJOR CHALLENGES

The context and the theological themes we have spelled out above will help in dealing with two major challenges that we confront in Asia, **P. 368** even worldwide. These are first, the communication of God's word within the plurality of religions and cultures that we confront today, and second the response to the environmental challenge within Asia. All else, i.e., poverty, religion, modernity, urbanization etc., are only factors that help us to understand these issues within our context.

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Opening Address

Bong Rin Ro

It has been my privilege to work for the WEF Theological Commission (TC) since 1990 as its director, after serving the Asia Theological Association for 20 years. I have travelled to different countries to visit seminaries, met many theologians and attended theological consultations. For the past eight months I have been on my sabbatical leave from Korea to the United States, teaching module courses at five different theological seminaries.

The world and the church of the 21st century have many similarities with the world and the church of Martin Luther's time in the 16th century. Even in the theological field, the anthropocentric modern theological development with its emphasis on contextualization has become an increasing challenge to the evangelical church just as the Roman Catholic medieval theology of faith and reason and of superstitions became a stumbling block to Luther and other reformers. Therefore, just as Luther emphasized his doctrine of sola scriptura, sola gratia, sola fide, and solus Christus to bring the erring church back to the biblical doctrines, we in our day need to go back to the Reformation faith from our theological confusion existing not only in the liberal camp but also in the evangelical community around the world.