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The Mandate of Asian American Evangelical Theology

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I Asian American Evangelical Theology: Whence and w(h)ither

It is fair to say that we are still at the very beginning stages of Asian American evangelical theologizing.¹ As we shall see, we can only speak about Asian American evangelical theology if understood in a very broad sense. The following sketches three streams of such reflection, which enables comprehension of its largely conservative instincts.

Particularly for Asian Americans from an East Asian background, the Confucian emphasis on filial piety plays out in their evangelical spirituality. Some of the earliest works on Asian American evangelical theology, there-

fore, were focused on how especially second-generation Asian Americans could honour their parents while following Christ.² This was and remains an especially important matter if the immigrant generation were non-Christians. Beyond this is the pressure of perfectionist expectations by parents, not to mention having also to live into the 'model minority' stereotype outside the home. When combined with the deferential East Asian posture, many Asian Americans develop a self-inferiority complex—devastating within a culture of shame—particularly when having also to confront linguistic challenges in navigating through school and then a career.

¹ One of the few forays into the question remains Young Lee Hertig, 'Why Asian American Evangelical Theologies,' *Journal of Asian and Asian American Theology* 7 (2005–2006): 1–23.

² See Jeanette Yep, ed., *Following Jesus Without Dishonoring Your Parents: Asian American Discipleship* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1998), and Nikki A. Toyama and Tracey Gee, eds., *More Than Serving Tea: Asian American Women on Expectations, Relationships, Leadership and Faith* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, 2006).

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The ecclesial or congregational domain is also one where Asian American Evangelicals have expended some effort. This is to be expected given the long history of ethnic churches and the many debates, not to mention challenges, related to assimilation to the dominant culture. Within the literature on Asian American Evangelicalism, we find works on pastoral ministry (designed to equip ministers to cross generational, cultural, ecclesial, gender and other divides),³ congregational health and effectiveness (which provide models for ethnic-dominant, bilingual and even mixed ecclesial communities),⁴ and even a growing number of pan-Asian or pan-ethnic visions of the future (which often deal with the issues of race and racialization within an evangelical paradigm).⁵ Asian American Evangelicals have focused some of their energies on these ecclesiological matters. What can be hoped for is that these more practical,

ministerial and missional emphases will also translate, in due course, into more robust ecclesiological and theological reflection.

1. Recent developments in Asian American evangelical theology

It is at the more properly understood theological level that Asian American Evangelicals can be said to be barely out of the starting gate. Still, even in these gestational times, some potential routes for development can be discerned. One is a collection of essays that appeared in 2006.⁶ Published by the L2 Foundation, an organization devoted to Asian American leadership and legacy development, this is the first book to appear on the topic of Asian American *evangelical* theology.

The six essayists reflect the diversity of the AAE community. David Yoo, a historian at Claremont McKenna College, surveys (with two collaborators) the pre-WWII histories of Japanese and Korean American Christians and urges that religion needs to be factored into immigration and race analyses of these communities, even as Tim Tseng, a historian of American Christianity and founder of the Institute for the Study of Asian American Christianity, exposes the 'color blindness' of American church history and provides some hermeneutical options for moving beyond orientalist or assimilationist models of the Asian American Christian experience. A practical theologian at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, Peter

3 E.g., Ken Uyeda Fong, *Pursuing the Pearl: A Comprehensive Resource for Multi-Asian Ministry* (Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 1999), and Russell Yee, *Worship on the Way: Exploring Asian North American Christian Experience* (Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 2012).

4 See Peter Cha, S. Steve Kang and Helen Lee, eds., *Growing Healthy Asian American Congregations* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, 2006), and M. Sydney Park, Soong-Chan Rah and Al Tizon, eds., *Honoring the Generations: Learning with Asian North American Congregations* (Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 2012).

5 Elizabeth Conde-Frazier, S. Steve Kang and Gary A. Parrett, *A Many-Colored Kingdom: Multicultural Dynamics for Spiritual Formation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004), and Kenneth A. Mathews and M. Sydney Park, *The Post-Racial Church: A Biblical Framework for Multiethnic Reconciliation* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Academic, 2011).

6 D. J. Chuang and Timothy Tseng, eds., *Conversations: Asian American Evangelical Theologies in Formation* (Washington, D.C.: L2 Foundation, 2006).

Cha, discusses the challenges involved in identity formation among second-generation Korean Americans. An intriguing chapter is missiologist James Zo's (affiliated with Logos Evangelical Seminary in El Monte, California) insightful analysis of how structural and power issues complicate the assessment of racism, prejudice and discrimination on both sides of the American and Asian American equation.

For a volume on evangelical theology, the two explicitly theological contributions are by historical theologians: Paul Lim (who specializes in early modern England, has taught at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary and now is, as of the time of this writing, at Vanderbilt University) reveals the importance of biography in the construction of any Asian American evangelical theology, and Jeffrey Jue (a post-Reformation historian at Westminster Theological Seminary) seeks a way beyond both modernist experientialism and postmodernist subjectivism by returning to the gospel. The conversational approach of each chapter in the volume invites others to join in the discussion.

A second line of development lies with Asian American evangelical women, many of whom are also working in the area of biblical studies.⁷ A recent volume includes ten chapters, most springing off female biblical characters, all set within what Young Lee Hertig calls a 'yinit paradigm' that is neither merely feminist (nor womanist nor *mujerista*) nor yet acquiescent to the patriarchal structures dominant

within Asian American Evangelicalism in particular and (white) evangelical theology in general.⁸ *Mirrored Reflections* is thus a ground breaking and paradigmatic book not only for Asian American theology but also for evangelical biblical hermeneutics.

It opens up space for Asian American women's readings of the Bible without mimicking other feminist agendas; it embraces reader-response approaches while honouring the scriptural horizon; it boldly explores a counter-cultural contextualism, polyphonous multivocalism, and intersubjective perspectivism without lapsing into relativism; and it insists on the need for us to come to terms with pluralism, globalization and transnationalism in the pursuit of faithful Christian discipleship in our time. Arguably, this is biblical interpretation and theological reflection at its best: engaging, subversive, transformative and salvific—for women and men.⁹ Such paths opened up by Asian American evangelical women may well be what is most generative and productive for Asian American evangelical theology in the longer run.

The contributions of Hertig and

⁷ See Young Lee Hertig and Chloe Sun, eds., *Mirrored Reflections: Reframing Biblical Characters* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2010).

⁸ See Hertig's lead chapter, 'The Asian American Alternative to Feminism: A *Yinit* Paradigm,' in Hertig and Sun, eds., *Mirrored Reflections*, 3-14.

⁹ Perhaps in contrast to the dominant strands of Asian American evangelical biblical interpretation that have swallowed Western hermeneutical methods almost hook, line and sinker; see Andrew Yueking Lee, 'Reading the Bible as an Asian American: Issues in Asian American Biblical Interpretation,' in Viji Nakka-Cammauf and Timothy Tseng, eds., *Asian American Christianity: A Reader* (Castro Valley, CA: The Institute for the Study of Asian American Christianity, 2009), 60-69.

company run parallel to other Asian American evangelical voices that find themselves betwixt-and-between the centre of the evangelical movement and the mainline Protestant communities. Soong-Chan Rah's work mediates these spaces as representative of a promising path in contemporary Asian American evangelical theology.¹⁰ The potency of Rah's argument is that he speaks not only to Asian American Evangelicals but also to the evangelical theological establishment as a whole. This is because his is a call for the church to let go of its individualism, consumerism, materialism and racism—all effects of Western culture—in order to be freed from its cultural captivity.¹¹ Rah's analysis, however, can find deeper Asian American traction, particularly if wedded to the uncompromising call for living into the Asian American identity by theologians such as Jonathan Tran.¹² The latter empowers a distinctive Asian American voice, albeit one that is not parochial since it addresses larger ecclesial (and perhaps even social) concerns.¹³

The fact of the matter is, however, that there is little else available on Asian American evangelical theology and that Asian American Evangelicals are still a long way off from thinking theologically as Asian Americans. Part of the reason is that many Asian American Evangelicals, even those who are theologically trained, have basically replicated the majority evangelical (white) approaches to Scripture. Further, many second-generation Asian Americans have adopted the assimilationist experience as their model and have presumed that an 'American universalism' maps onto a biblical universalism.¹⁴

The result is the subordination of their racial and ethnic identities and modes of thinking. Among the many reasons for this is the dominant conservatism of Asian American culture, especially within ecclesial communities of East Asian descent (e.g., Chinese, Korean, Japanese and Vietnamese churches). As such, Asian Americans are content to persist with

10 Soong-Chan Rah, *The Next Evangelicalism: Freeing the Church from Western Cultural Captivity* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, 2009).

11 From a hermeneutical perspective, see the similar argument of E. Randolph Richards and Brandon J. O'Brien, *Misreading Scripture with Western Eyes: Removing Cultural Blinders to Better Understand the Bible* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, 2012).

12 See Jonathan Tran, 'A Few Things I Want from Asian American Evangelicals,' in Nakka-Cammauf and Tseng, *Asian American Christianity*, 243-51; cf. also Tran, 'Identity as Missiology,' *SANACS Journal* 1 (2009): 29-40.

13 Matthew Soerens and Jenny Hwang, *Welcoming the Stranger: Justice, Compassion and Truth in the Immigration Debate* (Downers

Grove, IL: IVP Books, 2009) is another example of Asian American Evangelicals speaking into wider conversations, precisely the thrust of this book and part of its goal in terms of motivating Asian American evangelical theological inquiry. I will return to discuss the proposals of this volume in more depth in chapter six.

14 This is my way of putting what other Asian American scholars have also observed; see both Antony W. Alumkal, 'The Scandal of the 'Model Minority' Mind? The Bible and Second-Generation Asian American Evangelicals,' and Timothy Tseng, 'Second-Generation Chinese Evangelical Use of the Bible in Identity Discourse in North America,' both in Tatsiong Benny Liew, *The Bible in Asian America: Semeia* 90-91 (Atlanta: The Society of Biblical Literature, 2002), 237-50 and 251-67, respectively.

the status quo of evangelical theology inherited from their (white) evangelical teachers.

2. Asian American evangelical conservatism.

The phenomenon of East Asian or Confucian cultural conservatism is, of course, a complicated one to untangle. On the one hand, there is something to the stereotype of East Asian Confucianism as essentially androcentric (in subordinating women to men), patriarchal (sustained by the tradition's emphasis on filial piety) and authoritarian (preserved in the king-subject and older-younger brother aspects of the 'five-fold relations'). On the other hand, like most extended cultural traditions, Confucianism has been neither static nor free from dissenting trends that have attempted to retrieve, reappropriate and, when necessary, jettison these traditional doctrines for the late modern world.¹⁵ Certainly, in the North American context, there are progressive forces at work especially among second and later generations of Asian Americans, but equally certainly, the weight of portable cultural and philosophical traditions like Confucianism (see chapter two) means that change occurs slowly.

Within the Asian American evangelical community, the gradual transformation of the inherited cultural conservatism is certainly being played out, even if at a much slower pace than in nonevangelical contexts. On

the one side, the gospel is understood as providing a critical perspective on culture—on which I will say more momentarily; on the other side, however, there are certain biblical themes such as honouring of parents and the submission of women (read off the surface of some Pauline texts) that resonate with the filial piety of especially Confucian cultures, and these have inevitably become central issues for the forging of Asian American identities.¹⁶ Hence Asian American immigrants who are attracted to Christianity are often drawn to evangelical Protestantism because it provides a similarly conservative worldview, one that enables their acculturation into American society. For these reasons, Confucian conservatism morphs, among Asian American Protestants, into a form of evangelical conservatism.

To be sure, the exact role of Confucianism behind Asian American evangelical conservatism might be debated among scholars, particularly since the appropriation of the Confucian tradition across the Asian American diaspora is not all of one stripe. At the same time, even if other Asian traditions were to be factored into the matrix of Asian American life, many are informed by a kind of patriarchal, hierarchical and authoritarian conservatism that functions similarly in East Asian Confucian culture. In short, perhaps the 'model minority' stereotype, as contested as might be such a designation, that characterizes much of the Asian American experience contributes to the conserv-

¹⁵ See here Daniel A. Bell, *China's New Confucianism: Politics and Everyday Life in a Changing Society* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2008), chap. 3.

¹⁶ E.g., Tom Lin, *Losing Face and Finding Grace: 12 Bible Studies for Asian Americans* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1996), esp. part 1.

atism that permeates Asian American Evangelicalism.

3. North American evangelical conservatism and its implications

But highlighting East Asian conservatism tells only one side of the story about why Asian Americans tend to be contented with and passive recipients of the theology of the dominant evangelical culture. The other half of this tale has to do with North American conservatism as well. Of course, historically, North American Evangelicalism was formed out of a long history of reaction to mainline Protestant liberalism. By definition, to be conservative means to resist the forces of change insofar as such changes are thought to compromise the received values of a particular tradition. So while some changes have been embraced, evangelical conservatives have long resisted what are perceived as adjustments to historic Christian orthodoxy foisted upon the North American church by their liberal counterparts.¹⁷ More recently, Evangelicals have also entered into the culture wars in defence of traditional family values and other aspects of the agenda of the Republican Party.

Over time, then, Evangelicals have been led to develop theological arguments for their conservative stances. Most relevant for the Asian Ameri-

can experience is how the dominant evangelical culture has accepted, while slightly redefining, at least more recently, the basic categories of the classical *Christ and Culture* study of H. Richard Niebuhr.¹⁸ Yet historically, Evangelicals have embraced the 'Christ against culture' stance, albeit more recently shifting more toward the 'Christ transforming culture' posture. This involves either, at worst, the rejection of culture, which has traditionally characterized evangelical sectarianism (especially among fundamentalists, the close cousins of Evangelicals),¹⁹ or at best, an ambiguous relationship with culture, one featuring what might be called a cultural hermeneutic of suspicion that is always concerned about syncretism with the world. Culture, in popular evangelical parlance, is almost equivalent to the world, and in that sense, is what humans need to be saved from rather than partake of.

So how has this played out in Asian American evangelical communities? Most pointedly, Asian American Evangelicals have traditionally understood their Christian conversion to involve either a turning away from their Asian cultural roots or a minimizing of such aspects of their identity. That Christian

¹⁸ See H. Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture* (1951; repr., San Francisco: Harper Torchlight, 1956); cf. Glen H. Stassen, D. M. Yeager and John Howard Yoder, *Authentic Transformation: A New Vision of Christ and Culture* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1996).

¹⁹ I.e., as manifest in missionary and evangelistic strategies that called on converts to abandon their cultural beliefs and practices in following Christ—e.g., Birgit Meyer, *Translating the Devil: Religion and Modernity Among the Ewe in Ghana* (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 1999).

¹⁷ There are many versions of this story; my own telling is here: 'The Word and the Spirit, or the Spirit and the Word? Exploring the Boundaries of Evangelicalism in Relationship to Modern Pentecostalism,' *Trinity Journal* 23, no. 2 (2002): 235-52.

conversion actually involves Americanization is quite prevalent across the Asian American scene. In my own case growing up, as already indicated in the prologue, we never talked about the importance of Chinese culture; the emphasis at home (my parents were first-generation converts to Christianity) was always on embodying Christian culture. Many Asian Americans thus tend to view their Asian historical and cultural legacies in binary terms: food, dress and music might be retained, because they concern the outward aspects of life, which are incidental anyway to true human identity; but literary, philosophical and religious ideas are to be cautiously approached (at best) since they are probably representative of 'the world' and thus antithetical to the gospel.

This confluence of Confucian and evangelical conservatism has been strengthened through the process of theological education. Asian American Evangelicals tend to attend solidly evangelical seminaries because of their conservative commitments. So whereas mainline Protestant seminaries are much more focused on corporate identities, evangelical seminaries, and their curricula, focus more on personal identities, particularly the formation of spiritual lives in relationship to Christ.²⁰

What this means is that ethnic identities are minimized as having no more than biological significance, and that historical and cultural aspects of Asian

identity are accepted only as accidental to identity in Christ. Asian American Evangelicals are first and foremost Christians, and only secondarily, if at all, Asians (although, interestingly, the prevalence of nationalism among Evangelicals means that American identity is much more important than evangelical rhetoric usually lets on). Evangelical theological education thus provides the philosophical and theological apparatus to make sense of such modes of identity construction

II The Burden of Evangelical Theology—a Minority Report

[The middle section of the chapter, 'The burden of evangelical theology; a minority report', highlights the characteristics of Western evangelical theology embraced by many Asian American Evangelicals, including on its global epistemology, a-cultural hermeneutic, biblical-theological method, and universal doctrinal framework, and argues that Asian American Evangelicals have 'internalized the white evangelical worldview' and so 'do not see the need to think explicitly from an Asian American vantage point'. However, the argument proceeds from the conviction that the Asian American Evangelical community has a much more significant contribution to make, and the final section of the chapter outlines some elements of how that might be achieved.]

III The Mandate of Asian American Evangelical Theology

The preceding analysis raises self-critical awareness for Asian American

²⁰ Russell Jeung, 'Evangelical and Mainline Teachings on Asian American Identity,' in Liew and Yee, *Bible in Asian America*, 211-36, reprinted in Nakka-Cammauf and Tseng, *Asian American Christianity*, 197-216.

Evangelicals and invites them, in dialogue with other Evangelicals, to consider whether their minority status is problematic and what, if anything, can and ought to be done about it. Now I am aware that there are developments within the evangelical theological tradition, broadly construed, that have moved beyond some of the strictures identified in the preceding section. Progressive evangelicals, the evangelical left and postconservative evangelicals denote just a few of the trends, among others, percolating on the margins of evangelical theology.²¹

But that is precisely part of the problem: that these are movements that except for a small minority remain outside the evangelical mainstream and that they have also, by and large, been ignored by Asian American evangelical scholars and theologians. I believe that productive ways forward can be charted via Asian American evangelicals in dialogue with some of these ideas, although at the end of the day, such conversations will be only as productive as Asian American evangelicals formulate a platform on which they can bring something substantive to the discussion. This latter task is part of the present challenge, and burden of the present book.

Insofar then that I am interested in the question of what Asian Americans can contribute to evangelical theology not just historically or sociologically but at a theological level, my claim is that pursuit of these matters, ironically, also involves taking seriously the

historicity and particularity of Asian American cultures, experiences and perspectives. In this final part of this chapter, I do no more than suggest, in broad strokes, how to go about such an undertaking.

1. Realities of the Asian American diaspora

Part of 'the problematic of evangelical theology' can be clarified if we situate Asian American evangelical theology amid the broader Asian American diasporic, historical and social realities described in part at the beginning of chapter two. Doing so enables the more stark realization that Asian American Evangelicals are constituted by a wide range of experiences on the one hand and the pressure to assimilate to American culture on the other. While Asians have lived in North America since the founding of the republic and had even contributed to the building of the American empire during the nineteenth century, the 1965 Immigration Act that repealed the Oriental Exclusion Act of 1924 reopened the door to a new wave of Asian migration. During the last generation, Asian American life has been further transformed by the forces of globalization: diasporas created by modernization, industrialization and urbanization; refugee populations displaced by war, famine and climate changes; movement enabled by the emergence of a worldwide market economy, advances in technology and mass communication; the cross-fertilization of ideologies; and shifts in international relations.²²

²¹ Many of these are discussed in Roger E. Olson, *Reformed and Always Reforming: The Postconservative Approach to Evangelical Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007).

²² For an overview of these issues, see Wanni W. Anderson and Robert G. Lee, eds., *Dis-*

The result, as saw in the previous chapter, is the appearance of a wide range of Asian American communities across North America. Life in such communities is fluid, affected by migration patterns, socioeconomic pressures and the strength of relations with those 'back home.' The stronger the transnational ties between Asian immigrants in the West and their families, organizations and institutions (religious and otherwise) in their homeland, the more intense and longer-lasting the exchange of religious goods and ideas (in the form of books, periodicals and various forms of telecommunication).

Unsurprisingly, then, first-generation immigrants often deepen the religious commitments that they held or practiced perhaps more nominally before moving. Sometimes immigrants convert to the more dominant religion of their new home. In either case, religious affiliation often serves to secure social networks, confer status otherwise difficult to come by for immigrants, and strengthen ethnic, cultural and linguistic bonds and identities. But for the 1.5 generation (those born in Asia but who grew up at least in part in the United States, like myself) the process of assimilation is well under way. In these cases, the ethnic enclave will develop English-speaking sections, as

well as social organizations, school clubs and Christian congregations.

For young adult Asian American Evangelicals, however, there is often a keen sense that their own ethnically organized congregations or groups are somehow less religiously and theologically legitimate because they do not have the more 'universal' appeal of white or multicultural evangelical churches or parachurch organizations.²³ The result is either the transition of ethnic congregations into pan-ethnic congregations or movement from their 'home' congregation to other less ethnically defined church environments.²⁴ By the time the second generation attains adulthood, the remaining cultural or linguistic barriers to full assimilation into American society are practically overcome, often to the dismay of parents and grandparents.²⁵

²³ See, e.g., Rebecca Y. Kim, 'Negotiation of Ethnic and Religious Boundaries by Asian American Campus Evangelicals,' in Tony Carnes and Fenggang Yang, eds., *Asian American Religions: The Making and Remaking of Borders and Boundaries* (New York: New York University Press, 2004), 141-59, and Rudy V. Busto, 'The Gospel According to the Model Minority? Hazardous an Interpretation of Asian American Evangelical College Students,' in David K. Yoo, ed., *New Spiritual Homes: Religion and Asian Americans* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1999), 169-87.

²⁴ See Russell Jeung, *Faithful Generations: Race and New Asian American Churches* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2004).

²⁵ As can be discerned by reading between the lines of the Bible studies in Tom Lin's *Losing Face and Finding Grace*. This appears to be the case whether the second generation intentionally attempts to distinguish its ethnic congregational life from that of the first immi-

placements and Diasporas: Asians in the Americas (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2005). I discuss further the implications of globalization for Christian theology in Amos Yong and Peter Heltzel, 'Robert Cummings Neville and the Global Future of Theology,' in Yong and Heltzel, eds., *Theology in Global Context: Essays in Honor of Robert Cummings Neville* (New York: T & T Clark, 2004), 29-42, esp. 30-34.

What does such assimilation consist of? Certainly speaking English, participating in the market economy and adapting to the options provided by American secularity and politics are minimal adjustments. But perhaps assimilation also requires abandoning the norms of the immigrant culture in favour of American norms for family and gender relations, and engaging with the public square on its terms. If so would this not lead to an evangelical self-understanding deeply formed by American culture, politics and economics? Would this not result in a subordination and even deformation of all that is Asian except for the biological phenotype? It would appear, then, that becoming American would more easily facilitate the embrace of evangelical Christianity—if such is defined as a suburban, Midwestern, white, middle-class religious phenomenon with Wheaton, Illinois, as its veritable ‘Mecca’—but this brings with it the cost of losing one’s Asianness. Does this mean that full acceptance of Evangelicalism includes ‘repentance’ from Asia and ‘conversion’ to Americanism?²⁶

grant generation, or whether the second generation becomes absorbed into nonethnic or even multiethnic congregations; on this point, see Elaine Howard Ecklund, ‘Models of Civic Responsibility: Korean Americans in Congregations with Different Ethnic Compositions,’ *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 44, no. 1 (2005): 15–28.

26 One could also make the reverse argument, however, that Evangelicalism in the United States has already been molded by its social, cultural and historical context to the extent that the very features that mark the American way of life—i.e., individualism, experientialism, pragmatism, even consumerism—have also come to characterize evangeli-

cal Christianity. For an insightful analysis of the oftentimes uncritical conflation of Evangelicalism and Americanism, and of the forces that have also resisted such accommodations, see D. G. Hart, *That Old-Time Religion in Modern America: Evangelical Protestantism in the Twentieth Century* (Chicago: Dee, 2002).

That this is not the case seems to be borne out by the sociological literature, which confirms that ethnicity remains just as important as religion in the formation of Asian American identity.²⁷ But if so, evangelical theology has not even begun to wrestle with the importance of ethnicity and race, not to mention their theological implications. Second-generation Korean Americans, for instance, seem to be intuitively drawn to churches and parachurch ministries that foreground their Korean cultural identity,²⁸ but they have developed few theological rationales for such forms of social organization; more to the point, their own theological presuppositions mitigate against such activity, which may explain their identity conflictedness.

Unsurprisingly, then, Asian American evangelical theology has yet to get off the ground even at the beginning of the twenty-first century. Asian American Evangelicals getting degrees from institutions of higher education have had to wrestle with/against this assim-

cal Christianity. For an insightful analysis of the oftentimes uncritical conflation of Evangelicalism and Americanism, and of the forces that have also resisted such accommodations, see D. G. Hart, *That Old-Time Religion in Modern America: Evangelical Protestantism in the Twentieth Century* (Chicago: Dee, 2002).

27 See Jerry Z. Park, ‘The Ethnic and Religious Identities of Young Asian Americans’ (PhD diss., University of Notre Dame, 2004).

28 See Sharon Kim and Rebecca Y. Kim, ‘Second-Generation Korean American Christians’ Communities: Congregational Hybridity,’ in Carolyn Chen and Russell Jeung, eds., *Sustaining Faith Traditions: Race, Ethnicity, and Religion Among the Latino and Asian American Second Generation* (New York: New York University Press, 2012), 176–93.

ilative impulse, have had to struggle with the question of whether they are or should be doing (descriptive) sociology rather than theology (as normative reflection), and have had to articulate an apologetic for doing *Asian American* evangelical theology rather than just *evangelical* theology. For too many Asian American Evangelicals, their status 'betwixt and between'—on the one hand belonging to Asia and to the United States in some respects, but on the other hand being a stranger to both Asia and the United States in other respects—puts them in a unique position to interrogate evangelical theology but (to date) leaves them outside the formal organizational and institutional structures to critique effectively and transform the evangelical theological tradition.

2. Moving trajectories of theological reflection

Of course, if Asian Americans hope to climb the ranks of the North American evangelical theological academy, they can only do so on the terms established by their hosts. And rather than responding to sociopolitical factors, the evangelical theological guild has always understood itself primarily in theological terms and seen its charge as defending historical orthodoxy, whether that be against liberalism's denial of biblical supernaturalism, against neo-orthodoxy's ambiguous stance on Scripture, against mainstream science's theory of evolution, against open theism's doctrine of God, and so on.²⁹ If evangelical

theology has never before entertained ethnic perspectives in its discursive construction, why now undermine the (its presumed) universal framework and applicability by adding the *Asian* or *Asian American* qualifiers?

While in a sense this entire book provides a set of responses to this question, here I suggest three reasons that can motivate such a theological path forward.

First, the Asian diaspora in the United States is now in a situation to reflect substantively on its experience of migration. While there are tremendous challenges to migration,³⁰ some Asian Americans have achieved a level of upward social mobility so that they are now in the position of producing scholarship informed by such experiential perspectives. Since the memory of migration among Asian Americans is more recent than those of their Caucasian colleagues, such perspectives might be helpful to identify how the migration from the European continent has shaped the evangelical theological enterprise as a whole. If Asian Americans can help their evangelical colleagues identify the historical impact of old to new world migration on the beliefs and practices of North American Evangelicalism, that in itself will open up possibilities for considering afresh Asian American histories and their contributions to the wider conversation.

alism: The Postwar Evangelical Coalition (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1997).

³⁰ Some of these are documented by Kenneth J. Guest, *God in Chinatown: Religion and Survival in New York's Evolving Immigrant Community* (New York: New York University Press, 2003), whose work we will return to in chapter six.

²⁹ Evangelical theology's many internal and external battles are documented by Jon R. Stone, *On the Boundaries of American Evangelicalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002).

Second, Asian Americans are forced to think about race and ethnicity in a way unlike most of their white brothers and sisters, although their reflections can also mediate perspective in an otherwise white-and-black demarcated world. Race and ethnicity are undeniable aspects of Asian American history and experience. The import of this is at least twofold. First, Asian Americans are positioned to engage the discussion opened up by black evangelical theologians regarding contemporary theology—even in its evangelical guises—as reflecting the ascent of white perspectives in the early modern period at the expense of Jewish and other nonwhite cultural realities. Asian American perspectives on race and ethnicity will open up new vistas on the racial and ethnic dimensions of the biblical world.³¹ In other words, the marginalized histories and perspectives of Asian American Evangelicals have much to contribute to contemporary biblical interpretation and theological explication. The dominant forms of evangelical theology forged in part out

of the hegemony of Christendom are in need of critical analysis and dialogical revision.

Last but not least, central and ongoing elements of Asian American history are part of the present experiences of transnationalism and globalization. The issues here are complex.³² One matter that needs to be addressed is the interwoven character of the global economy and how it affects people around the world differently depending on various social, political and cultural circumstances. In addition, with regard to the Asian American side of this equation, there remain difficult issues related to how the question of assimilation or acculturation is being negotiated and adjudicated. First-, second- and third-generation perspectives differ, sometimes momentarily, and this does not even factor in the perspectives of the 1.5 generation.

If theology is to engage the historical realities of real flesh-and-blood human beings, it must engage such questions in our contemporary world. Asian American Evangelicals can lead the way in thinking theologically about such things, and this will benefit not only Asian American communities but also those of other ethnic, racial and cultural groups who are also wrestling with life in the twenty-first-century global context.

Evangelical theology today will need to heed more intentionally than it has before factors of migration, ethnicity, globalization and transnationalism. Asian American Evangelicals can assist with these matters, if they will

31 Asian Evangelicals thus need to build from the insightful readings of mainline Protestant biblical scholar Tat-Siong Benny Liew, *What Is Asian American Biblical Hermeneutics? Reading the New Testament* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2008), regarding the ethnic dynamics underneath Jewish-Gentile relations in the New Testament. To be sure, Liew's mainline Protestant assumptions may be rather distant from evangelical ones, so some critical dialogue and perhaps correction may also be in order. Yet the strength of Liew's book is to suggest how Asian American experiences of ethnic marginality can illuminate the disputes between Jewish and Gentile followers of the Messiah in the first century. This is an issue worth substantial engagement from an evangelical perspective.

32 E.g., Neil J. Ormerod and Shane Clifton, *Globalization and the Mission of the Church* (New York: T & T Clark, 2011).

arise to the occasion. This does not detract from the universality of the gospel message. On the contrary it addresses questions of universal significance that are otherwise neglected or engaged from or within only one (dominant, centrist) set of perspectives.

3. Reconnecting to the broader evangelical theological tradition.

Before concluding this chapter, however, an important caveat ought to be sounded. None of the preceding should be read as denying either Asian American indebtedness to the evangelical tradition or the interrelatedness of Asian American and other evangelical efforts in the contemporary theological task. The preceding might suggest that Asian Americans are only pointing accusing fingers at their white evangelical friends. Without taking away anything from the seriousness of the foregoing discussion, I also realize that white Evangelicals in particular and Americans in general have been welcoming to Asians and that we have made it this far on our diasporic journey only with the help of such friends.

Beyond such ecclesial collegiality, however, I would grant that Asian Americans are in various respects beholden theologically to American Evangelicals as well. In particular, American evangelical commitments to Christ-centeredness, biblical faithfulness and missionary zealotry are important elements of Christian belief and practice in the twenty-first century. Asian American Evangelicals should embrace and live out such commitments not only for themselves but also for other Evangelicals and even for the world.

Yet my claim is precisely that such a posture enables Asian American Evangelicals to contribute theologically to the formation of an evangelical belief and praxis relevant to the twenty-first century. For this to happen, however, Asian American Evangelicals must embrace not only the *evangel* but also the historicity of their diasporic experiences.

The incarnation of the Son of God consisted, after all, of taking on the concreteness, palpability and temporality of human, Jewish and first-century Palestinian flesh, and the outpouring of the Spirit of God on the Day of Pentecost involved the redemption of the diversity of human tongues, languages and cultures so that they might bear witness to the wondrous works of God (Acts 2:11). This pentecostal theme—related to Acts 2 first and foremost, albeit refracted unavoidably through the lens of my modern pentecostal ecclesial sensibilities—will inform the deep structure of the argument in the remainder of this volume, yet achieved within a pent-evangelical rather than merely charismatic frame of reference.

My point going forward, however, is that in light of these theological and trinitarian commitments, Evangelicals should be the first to embrace the diversity of their historical particularities rather than shy away from them. Traditionally, of course, Evangelicals have subordinated the vicissitudes of history, and with that their anxieties about the flux and subjectivities of experience, to the surety and foundationalism of the Word of God as revealed in the Scriptures. My proposal, however, is that the work of God in Christ and by the Spirit redeems us amid, with and through the specificities of our his-

torical and cultural experience (rather than saving us from out of such altogether) and thus that the Word of God speaks into such realities (rather than that we have to deny them or reject them as part of who we are).

In short, Asian American Evangelicals do not need to be apologetic about their lives, experiences and perspectives. Rather, by following the path of the Son of God into the far country, by receiving the infilling of the Spirit of God poured out on all flesh, and by faithfully attempting to live out such a Christ-centred and Spirit-empowered

faith in the footsteps of their evangelical forebears and ancestors, Asian Americans may then be able to bring their theological gifts to the conversation table, gifts that will challenge the discussion while simultaneously enriching the fare for all those concerned about the *euangelion* in the present time. It is time to theologize as Asian Americans, not just as Evangelicals, in order that Evangelicalism itself can be renewed and invigorated for the sake of the gospel and in anticipation of the reign of God.

PATERNOSTER THEOLOGICAL MONOGRAPHS

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