

Reading the Bible with Asian Eyes

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The term Asianization is more prevalent in mission literature these days. In the 20th century, Asian theologies such as Minjung theology (Korean context), “Indian Christian Theology” (by Robin Boyd), and the more recent “Contextual Ecotheology” (Chung 2016; Hong 2013; Hwang 2007; H.Y. Kim 2017; K. J. Kim 2010; Y. B. Kim 2005; Kwan 2014; Lai 2014; Oh 2016) appeared. However, my intention here is not to engage with the new trend: I reject so much estrangement to a universal interpretation. Also, my view and references I am using are primarily evangelical point of view that holds the truth of God’s revelation given in Scripture is transcultural. However, my task in this paper is to connect and balance the Word of God (theology) and its cultural relevance (doing theology) in the Asian context. Kirk (Kirk, 2000, kindle, 946) states the difficulty of interpreting the Bible from an Asian perspective like this:

Conceptually, it is difficult to separate belief in the Gospel from the values and institutions of Western society in which the Gospel has been subtly shaped. It is also difficult to relate the Gospel to societies molded for so long by vastly different belief systems. How does one commend a faith which has intersected with local cultures only in recent times and is generally seen as an intruder? The difficulties are associated both with a lack of identification and with transplantation.

I lived in Asia (Korea and the Philippines) for more than half of my life, as much as I spent in western countries. My lenses used to observe the world is through a multicultural and egalitarian perspective; it maybe not be from a typical Asian’s. But the goal here is to exegete the Scripture according to the author’s original intent and, at the same time, to convey distinct emphases found within contemporary Asian reality. Wu (Wu, 2015, 51) expresses the dilemma of doing so as “we should communicate and apply the Scripture in a way that is faithful to the text’s original meaning. If only it were that simple. This point is uncontroversial; however, actually doing it is more of a challenge.” We believe the Holy Spirit works on us as much as the original writers; however, some differences in contexts and cultures are unavoidable. The Bible came to us through several layers of processes. Newbigin (Newbigin, 1995, 146) states the complex process of the Gospel deliverers to a particular hearer: the medium of human languages. A missionary does not come with the pure Gospel; the Gospel a missionary brings is already embodied in cultures. At least it is three cross-cultural: the Bible culture, missionary Christianity, and the traditional culture of the hearer. Indeed, we have to consider the

complex process of this cross-cultural intricacy.

Kaiser Jr. (Kaiser Jr., 2007, 223) heeds the role of the interpreter as “the interpreter must bridge the gulf of explaining the cultural elements that are present in the text of Scripture, acknowledge [one’s] own cultural baggage as an interpreter, and then transcend both to communicate the original message of Scripture into the culture of the contemporary audience.”

THE SCOPE OF ASIAN CONTEXTS

Above, I express the ramification of the process cross-culturally. The following is the other geographical and cultural complexity in describing “Asia.” Interestingly, Scarborough (Scarborough, 1998, 74) claims that even among Asian countries, there is a clear distinction between Confucian and non-Confucian societies. He distinguishes “doing culture” from “being culture” like this:

The primary difference is that the Confucian culture is a doing culture, whereas the non-Confucian is a being culture. The former places more importance on tasks relative to maintaining relationships; has a strong internal locus of control and sees nature as at least somewhat controllable; seeks to bring about change actively to conform to some idealized, abstract, improved state; prefers to think analytically, use objective information, and assign status on merit and achievement; tends to view time as linear and a valuable resource to be conserved; and takes a more compartmentalized, less holistic view of life relationships or family are kept separate.

Eastern Asia, like China, Korea, and Japan, are “doing” culture categories, while South-East Asians are more like having “being culture” worldviews. Scarborough continues with the description of the uniqueness of these worldviews:

Being cultures tend to be more relaxed, more holistic in their worldviews, more relationship-oriented (relationships are part of work), and more accustomed to yielding power; view time as a continually recurring cycle; feel less able to control their fate; and want work, which at best can be enjoyed and at worst can be tolerated as a necessary evil. Being people define themselves by their collective affiliations. They “work to live,” whereas their “doing” counterparts live to work.” “Doing people” see “being” people as lazy, unproductive, and irresponsible. “Being” people see “doing” people as cold, compulsive, and unable to enjoy life (Scarborough, 1998,74).

Not only the distinction between Confucious

states and non-Confucious but also other variants are present. Socio-politically speaking, there are various formations of governments, from democrats to dictatorships (and communists). Also, different religious backgrounds of people from Hinduism, Muslim, Buddhism, and Shamanism (and Animism) shape intrinsic worldviews. I also realize that the description of Asia (or Asians) seems unrealistic: geographical gaps, cultural diversities, religious backgrounds, socio-political situations, etc. Geographically, the Asia continent is vast compared to Europe. Because of these presuppositions, I feel reluctant to interpret and apply the passages with “Asian eyes.”

HERMENEUTICAL CONSIDERATIONS AND METHODOLOGY

Definitions for hermeneutics abound. One of the trailblazers in hermeneutics, Thiselton (Thiselton, 2009, 1), defines it in this manner: “hermeneutics explores how we read, understand, and handle texts, especially those written in another time or a context of life different from our own. Biblical hermeneutics investigates more specifically how we read, understand, apply, and respond to biblical texts.” Top of that, missional hermeneutics requires deeper awareness of the mission of God and his people in both past and present contexts. We can reinterpret such narratives in our own contexts to participate in God’s mission (Van Engen, 1991). Kim (Kim, 2017, 71) rightly states that the starting point of hermeneutics like this:

If we start with understanding human contexts, our preaching and teaching are susceptible to eisegesis – reading into the text what is not there, based on our specific cultural lens. Therefore, a more appropriate perspective, beginning with God’s Word, enables us to keep our preaching grounded in the truth of Scripture. Only then do we apply it to a specific context.

In this case, Kim (2017, 83) suggests three target points: assumption, conflict, and questions employing Scriptures in the context. First, what assumptions might our listeners have as they read or hear this passage? Second, to interpret the Scripture in our context is to address the conflicts that listeners have with the text. Third, we want to consider what questions this passage raises for our listeners. I will take Van Engen and Kim’s concerns seriously when I examine passages to apply in Asian contexts. In this chapter, methodologically, I will use both approaches: getting a Scripture passage (original author’s intention) to apply in Asian reality and an anthropological approach (human practices) seeking the answer from the Bible.

DOING THEOLOGY IN A GLOBALIZING WORLD

Doing theology in a particular context is more

challenging in the 21st century environment. In Asian faith communities and other parts of the world, like Latin America and Africa, the upheaval of a new consciousness on contextualization of their own theologies is now on the upswing. Van Engen (1991, 57) mentions the practicality of doing theology in a globalizing world in contextualizing ways that align with the oneness of the Church and the Holy Spirit. He emphasizes this glocal¹ balance as “neither monolithic nor atomized uniformity is a satisfactory approach to theology in a globalizing world.” Van Engen (Van Engen, 2006, 172) reminds us that regardless of the enormous differences in characteristics of localities, from different worldview assumptions and cultural practices, we still have to stick to the concept of the ekklesia (Ephesians 4:4-6): one Father, one Spirit, one baptism, and one body of Christ. At the same time, the Gospel of John 1:14, “the Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us,” the concept of the incarnation, actually gives an idea of appropriate contextualization as translatability (Van Engen, 2017).

BIBLICAL THEME, SALVATION: THE WAY OF UNDERSTANDING FROM SHAME TO HONOR AND DEFILEMENT TO CLEANSING

Shame-Honor is not a mere cultural theme but is also a fundamental explanation of God’s salvation image: the removal of shame and the restoration of honor. The Bible says much to honor-shame. Raising awareness of this issue has been published by many (Georges, 2010; Georges, 2014; Malina, 2001; Wu, 2016). Both Muller, in Shame and Honor, and Tennent, in Theology in the Context of World Christianity, appeal to Genesis 3 as Scriptural proof for the three major ethical worldviews also explained by Georges in his 3D Gospel: guilt, shame, and fear. Primarily Asian societies belong to shame-honor (from now on, S-H) cultures. The below chart illustrates that S-H holds a place in the Bible alongside teaching about guilt and righteousness. Here we will look into S-H cultural orientation for the relevance to my task (comparison with GI or FP will be omitted).

	Guilt (GI)	Shame-Honor (SH)	Fear (FP)
God (attribute)	Lawgiver, Judge (sinless, just)	Father, Patron (superior, faithful)	Ruler, Deliverer
Sin violates	God’s laws and justice	God’s face and glory	God’s power and authority
Sin is	Transgression and law-breaking	Dishonor and disloyalty	Insubordination and idolatry
Sinners are	Condemned	Rejected	Cursed
Consequences of sin	Judgment and punishment	Disgrace and impurity	Domination and bondage
Emotion of sin	Regret	Unworthiness	Anxiety
Jesus death	Bears the punishment for our moral transgression	Removes our shame and restores God’s face/honor	Defeats spirits and power
Forgiveness	Pardon wrongs	Reconciles relationships	Removes strongholds

* The chart created from Jayson George’s 3D Gospel page 54

1. The term “Glocal” is the combination word of Global and Local.

The comparison above shows that S-H culture focuses on relational languages, while GI culture expresses action verbs. Based on the above chart, I will explain a more approachable way on how to deal with sin issues and salvation through Jesus, who brings us to save face (explanation follows later).

Shame Means Losing Face and Identity

Shame is connected to exposure and rejection before peers or those in authority. Georges and Baker (Georges and Baker, 2016, 51) give biblical examples that shame causes someone to “lose face,” taking away their identity and value. They continue, “in the New Testament, we see that many recipients of Jesus’ grace bore some ascribed shame, for example, Gentiles, Samaritans, the bleeding woman, blind, deaf, lame, lepers, and demon-possessed. Their shame stemmed from congenital social realities beyond their control.”² In the Old Testament, Naomi became socially marginalized because of the death of her husband and sons. Then, through Boaz, God exalts Naomi and Ruth (gentile widow) and recovers their honor. Throughout the Bible, God provides new inheritance and ascribed identity. Many people living in S-H cultures believe their identity depends mainly on the ascribed and inherited shame, like a Caste system. But fortunately, God provides a new inheritance and ascribes a new identity through Christ. A thought-provoking explanation by Wu (Wu, 2016, 377-379) is that to Chinese people, he explains “sin” is like you publicly spitting in your father’s face. Because people do not acknowledge God, they themselves become shameful (Romans 1:24-31). If Christ did not die, God would not be righteous (cf. Rom 3:25-26). In that case, God lacks honor. God is shameful. Therefore, according to Wu, Jesus’ atonement is the act of saving Father God’s face.

Dumitrescu (Dumitrescu, 2020, 318) compares two different realms of the sin issue: “this creates a problem for Western missionaries because, from their perspective, the Gospel requires people first to admit their status as sinners. Admitting sin is a crucial point in the conversion process.” Some missionaries sometimes express their frustrations by the implication of locals’ sin concept when they do wrongdoing; if they are caught, it is shameful. Without understanding transgression, the cross, and the final judgment are meaningless. In fact, in some cultural settings, it is not easy to explain the concept of sin in their understanding convincingly and decisively. However, the Bible shows that shame is the consequence of sin. For example, in the “Fall” narrative in Genesis, Adam and Eve hid from God because they were ashamed of being naked (Genesis 3:10). Asians generally refuse to acknowledge their failures and mistakes publicly because they will lose face. Public discussions of weaknesses can lead to the view that Christianity is a shameful and foreign religion. Priest (

2. Georges and Baker comment that though not all whom Jesus freed from shame were in this category, for the prostitutes and tax collectors bore “achieved shame” resulting from their sinful/taboo behavior.

2006, 180) adverts about the consequences that follow in the inadequacy of sin concept as: “an inability to speak plausibly about sin undercuts our ability to speak persuasively of God and of what human relationship with God entails.” In many collective societies in Asia, if an action brings shame to a person or a group, that action is considered wrong. According to this value system, if telling the truth brings shame, it is wrong. The community decides on what is honorable and what is shameful. Our challenge would be to make truthfulness a shared honorable value in the community and lying a scandalous matter.

However, the Bible is sensitive to cultural issues when confronting sin and error in S-H-oriented cultures. Confrontation must be done with sensitivity to the culture (cf. 1 Tim 5:1). The Bible acknowledges different ways of cultural expression of shame and honor. However, Georges and Baker (Georges and Baker, 2016, 284) point out that Romans 14 unequivocally affirms that only God defines true shamefulness and honorableness. People in S-H cultures must come to acknowledge the falseness of social shame, even though initially it may be excruciating. It is prevalent in Korea, especially among male officers in government (or in a company) who kill themselves on the job—either because they cannot bear the shame or proof of their innocence.³ In Acts 16, the Philippian jailer also sought to kill himself to cover his shameful failure on the job. He acted to preserve the honor of his people by sacrificing his own life. The Philippian jailer overcomes the weight between God’s honor and possible social shame through Paul’s persuasion. Mbuvi (Mbuvi, 2002, 295) explains, “by clearly directing people to the correct dimension of honor and shame as the vertical relationship with God, rather than the horizontal relationship with a man. We can affirm that God is the true ‘significant other’ who ascribes honor to us even when we do not deserve it.” Then, how is Jesus’ good news to people mired in shame and seeking honor? I found a good illustration from the book Jae-suk Lee’s *Mission as Integrated Witness: A Missional Reading of the Foot-washing Narrative*. Lee (Lee, 2021) sees John’s understanding of Jesus’ mission as freedom and forgiveness of sin (8:32-34; 20:23). From now on, I will bring a survey of the central theme of God’s salvation as “removal of shame and restoration of honor” from the selected Bible passages.

Consecrating Community: Jesus’ foot washing in John 13

Jesus’ feet washing in John’s narrative represents how His followers were consecrated from the world. In other words, this ritualistic foot washing also acknowledges that the world is defiled, and the followers of Christ need to purify the community.

3. South Korea has the highest suicide rate in the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), with around 13 thousand people taking their own lives in 2021. <https://www.statista.com/topics/8622/suicide-in-south-korea/#topicOverview>

Anthropologist Pitt-Rivers (Pitt-Rivers, 1968, 6:505) explains parts of the human body symbolically demonstrate honor and shame in many ways: “the right hand purveys honor with gestures like touching, waving and shaking; the head embodies a person’s honor so is kissed and crowned; the face is a metonym for honor; feet are the lowest and dirtiest part of the body and thus symbolize disgrace; private parts signify the shame of vulnerability and desecration; and one’s blood transfers honor and is often the price in transactions of honor.” These symbolic images—washing the dirtiest part of our feet (cleansing of our transgression) and Jesus’ crucifixion (transfers honor) right after this ritual—spell out the ultimate Jesus’ ministry for us and ours. Jesus’ ministry clearly showed that the most humble act was the foot washing and the ultimate shame was being humiliated on the cross.

In verse 14, “you also should wash one another’s feet,” Jesus commands His faith community to continuously consecrate themselves to remain in Him and bear fruit (John 15:2-3).

Defilement and Cleansing

This is an illustration for the present time, indicating that the gifts and sacrifices being offered were not able to clear the conscience of the worshipper. They are only a matter of food and drink and various ceremonial washings—external regulations applying until the time of the new order (Heb 9:9-10, NIV). Defilement and cleansing are easier to understand in Asian culture because of the religious washing involved, and we can also see similarities in Hebrew people’s practices. In the Old Testament, the method of the blood of animals and the ashes of a heifer sprinkled on those who were ceremonially unclean sanctified them, so they were outwardly clean. However, according to Hebrew 9: 9-10, “this is an illustration for the present time, indicating that the gifts and sacrifices being offered could not clear the worshipper’s conscience. They are only a matter of food and drink. Various ceremonial piles of washing validate (external regulations applying) until the time of the new order. Those ceremonial cleansings can make you outwardly clean, as the Hebrew author illustrates, that we need the new order, which can clean “the conscience of the worshipper (9:9). Then, what is the new order the author is mentioning here? Muller (Muller, 2016, 223) illustrates the ultimate picture of God bearing our shame is found in Christ like this:

[Christ]who was stripped of His clothing when He was hung on the cross. Roman prisoners were often hung naked on a cross, exposed for the scoffers to see and ridicule. Consequently, even in this, Christ bore not only our sin on the cross, but also our shame. Once for all, Christ died on the cross, bearing our shame so that we might be freed from shame as well as guilt.

Therefore, those who follow Christ to the cross of shame will never be put to shame: “anyone who trusts in Him will never be put to shame” (Rom. 10:11).

UNDERSTANDING EVANGELISM IN THE ASIAN CONTEXT: “WHAT MUST I DO TO BE SAVED?” (ACTS 16:22-34)

Acts 16: 22-34, the jailor’s conversion story, provides a suitable example of a collective cultural orientation. Of course, being invited into a community and building relationships are crucial points for evangelism for all cultures, but even more critical to S-H cultures. Georges and Baker (Georges and Baker, 2016, 244) point out that Paul and Silas accepting meal invitations with nonbelievers is one way of honoring people. They also accentuate how important to create a bond with a group (or whole family) as; “a shared table preaches God’s honor as loud as a sermon in a collectivistic society.” Table fellowship also was a significant way Jesus honored people. Another case in point we can observe in these passages is a group conversion in mind. In collectivistic cultures, individual conversion to Christianity may shame one’s biological family and neighboring community. Georges (Georges, 2017, 69) states that many unreached peoples do not reject Christianity for theological reasons but because of social and cultural forces that disgrace one’s family.

Another missiologist Tennent (Tennent, 2007, 97-99), suggests that family conversion is plausible in honor-shame culture since this family conversion can avoid the scandal of one person disgracing the rest of the family. Often, the western approach to evangelism (like Evangelism Explosion and 4 Spiritual Law) targets personal confession of faith in Christ, which troubles individuals in a collective society. Especially foreign evangelists (my observation on the street evangelism by the short-term mission team and their native partners) approach strangers and present combative rhetoric of the new ideas that appears to be attacking their identity and honor. Of course, they will say “yes” to it to show their hospitality without knowing what is going on. In a collective society, people view conversion as transferring loyalty and identity to a new group, so they must experience the group before choosing to join it. Therefore, Georges and Baker (Georges and Baker, 2016, 244) suggest that participation in the body of Christ is the first step in the evangelistic process: community (belong), discipleship (behave), and evangelism (believe).

NEW HONOR CODE FOR BELIEVERS: 1 PETER

As Scripture says, “Anyone who believes in him will never be put to shame” (Rom 10:11, NIV). Be careful to live properly among unbelieving neighbors (1Pet :12a, NLT).

Ascribed Honor = God's Children

Those who follow Christ to the cross of shame will be inherited with ascribed honor as "children of God": God exchanges our old status as unclean and hopeless orphans for the status of worthy and honorable children. The epistle of 1 Peter provides believers with a new honor code to guide their level of conduct (Georges and Baker, 2016). Chapters 2-5 outline how Christians live out that divine honor in everyday life to keep believers on the track of God's honor (2:13-5:11). Peter's key to discipleship in honor-shame contexts is profoundly theological and deeply rooted in Jesus' shame-removing and honor-restoring life. Similarly, Eng (Eng, 2022, 672) explains the epistle of James also uses the dynamic of honor and shame to motivate his hearers, and the exhortations demonstrate the priority of relationships within the collective and concern for the group's reputation. Eng continues, "in our experiences, these are significant areas of life in which sub-biblical honor codes can so easily entangle Christians. If a believer's honor code is not resonated with God's, then substantial parts of a believer's life will be determined by the default values of cultures." The Bible appeals to honor to guide Christians' moral decisions in several ways: Christians should glorify God, purify themselves, and love others (Georges and Baker, 2016). These three principles provide a biblical rubric for ethical discernment in honor-shame contexts. Transforming the honor code is central to Christian discipleship in many ways. But ultimately, simply knowing God's honor code for life will not suffice. Here I will discuss some areas that must look into in Asian realities and challenges.

THE AREAS STRUGGLING WITH A NEW HONOR CODE IN THE ASIAN CONTEXT

Lying/cheating issue in the Asian Context
Don't lie to each other, for you have stripped off your old sinful nature and all its wicked deeds. Put on your new nature, and be renewed as you learn to know your Creator and become like him. (Col 3:9-10, NLT)

Lying belongs to our old identity. However, lying is a colossal issue among people, including Christians. Especially to Westerners, lying is inherently wrong; however, to some cultures, a lie may or may not be considered faulty if his group's interest is at stake. Lying (including white lies) is acceptable in some cultures as not a criminal activity or moral violation. Cheating during examinations in Bible college is not easy to eradicate in many places. Missionaries are sometimes frustrated by the implication of locals' sin concept when they do wrongdoing; if they are caught, it is shameful. My American colleague (missionary professor) expressed his frustration regarding cheating in his classroom, and his anxiety became unbearable. He left the mission field for a few other reasons; however, the cheating issue was one of them.

However, admitting sin is a crucial point in the conversion process. Without understanding

transgression, the cross, and the final judgment are meaningless. In fact, in some cultural settings, it is not easy to explain the concept of sin in their own understanding convincingly and decisively. Priest (Priest, 2006, 180) adverts about the consequences that follow in the inadequacy of sin concept as: "an inability to speak plausibly about sin undercuts our ability to talk persuasively of God and of what human relationship with God entails." He continues that as a believer, it involves a call to repentance to specific self-understandings undergirded and informed by a particular understanding of God. We know that the Bible is harshly judging this moral value. Throughout OT to NT, many scriptures mention that lying causes consequences. "Thou shall not lie" is one of the ten commandments, but even Christians have trouble. Leviticus 19:11, "Do not steal. Do not lie." Do not deceive one another; Prov 12:22, The LORD detests lying lips, but he delights in people who are trustworthy; Col 3:9, "Do not lie to each other, since you have taken off your old self with its practices."

Sometimes, harmless lies are used without hesitation or guilt since these actions instead create a flattering or pacifying situation. There is a specific illustration given by Fernando (Fernando, 2022, 177) of how this habitual behavior builds up an effect on even a Christian child at home:

A child cries when she sees her father leave home. Her Christian mother soothes her by saying that he is going to a shop and will come back soon. Actually, he was leaving on a two-week trip. Some years later, when someone comes to the door, and the daughter informs the mother about it, she tells her, "Tell him I'm not at home." This is the mother who introduced her daughter to Christianity. Over time, she comes to adopt the view that lying is acceptable for Christians.

MONEY ISSUE

In some countries in Asia, I observed some issues regarding fund raising. It is an area that has brought many scandals to the contemporary Church. Christians distort the facts when applying for funding or reporting about funds use. In some societies, inflating and deflating prices is almost an ordinary practice. In a culture where lying is common, leaders who do not lie would stand out as a challenge to their people. In an environment where lying is acceptable, confronting it would be considered an example of disloyalty to people in the group. I witnessed some elders give testimonies to challenge congregations regarding paying property taxes without inflating the value. I heard many testimonies about how the church elders had been tempted to negotiate with tax assessors to lower the value of the properties.⁴ They testified how to fight against corruption and keep

4. I stayed in the Philippines from 2001-2016. You can see "no fixers" sign all over the city hall windows. The government is also trying to eliminate this societal viles while so many Christians are still struggling with the honesty issue in dealing with money in the Philippines context.

integrity as a truly Christian lifestyle: it is easy to identify corruption as one of the critical issues facing discipleship. It stands in the course of the believer's spiritual maturity. Miranda (Miranda, 1990, 2-5) laments the contemporary situation: "corruption is a way of life, rampant in every sector of the Filipino society." She draws attention to "a trilogy of maneuvers" deeply ingrained in the Filipino psyche: *lusot*, *lakad* and *lagay*. She defines them as follows:

- 1) *lusot* means to escape from something by wriggling into a hole or through a slit;
- 2) *lakad* means "walk,"; a euphemism for attempting to smooth out difficulties by using a network of "connections";
- 3) *lagay* means money to smooth over a situation, money set aside for illegal gambling or a bribe, plain and simple (1990, 2-5).

SUGGESTED STRATEGIES COMBATING LYING ISSUE IN A COLLECTIVE CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY

In this new life, it doesn't matter if you are a Jew or a Gentile, circumcised or uncircumcised, barbaric, uncivilized, slave, or free. Christ is all that matters, and he lives in all of us (Col 3:11, NLT)

Fernando (Fernando, 2022, 179) suggested the strategies for this lying issue in a collective Christian community as a two-fold strategy to combat the epidemic of lying in the Church. First, make revulsion for lying a shared value. Second, let Christians know that the Bible teaches that God abhors lying and that it will be judged. Then it would be considered a shame to lie. And shame is a powerful motivation for action, especially in collectivist cultures.

Saving Face Issue

All you need to say is simply 'Yes' or 'No'; anything beyond this comes from the evil one. (Mat 5:37. NIV)

From this Asian perspective of integrity and honesty, maintaining honor and avoiding shame justifies the lie when an untrue statement is necessary to save someone's face. A typical Asian concern is a social harmony – maintaining good relationships with the members of one's family. It comes from Filipino sensitivity that a person's feelings should not be hurt. Lapiz (Lapiz, 2010, 24) introduces two Tagalog terms like "*pakitang-tao*" (for appearance's sake) and "*pakikiramdam*" (being sensitive). According to Lapiz, *pakitang-tao* is superficial cordiality to conceal from those not involved in whatever unpleasantness may exist between parties. Therefore, this superficial cordiality of never saying "no," causes misunderstanding as assent. *Pakikiramdam* is also concerned about the feeling of others. *Pakikiramdam* is a request to feel or to be sensitive. It is a shared feeling, a kind of "emotional a priori." Sometimes, foreign Christians put locals in a problematic

situation because they have no idea how to identify cordiality and sincerity while they are doing an evangelistic campaign. Even among similar collective backgrounds, people encounter confusion. Kim (Kim, 2016, 81) testified to a case when a Korean mission team visited a local university in Chiang Mai, Thailand. Team members were so excited when some students received Christ with a short acceptance prayer. Later, the local Christians conducted the follow-up among those students who raised their hands during the meeting and found that they had no idea of what accepting the Gospel meant. Their actions were simply out of cultural courtesy to foreigners.

EQUALITY ISSUE IN THE CHURCH LEADERSHIP AND ASIAN REALITY⁵

Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility, value others above yourselves (Phil 2:3, NLT).

Don't lord it over the people assigned to your care, but lead them by your own good example. (1Pet 5:3, NLT).

A Partnership Issue Between Missionaries and National Leaders in the Ministry

In 2002, Rabbi Jonathan Sacks (Sacks, 2002, 17) posed a pertinent question in his book, *The Dignity of Difference*. "Can we live together?; Can we overcome long histories of estrangement and bitterness?; Can we find, in the human "thou," a fragment of the Divine "Thou"? Throughout the history of the Church and missions, equality issues between genders and missionary-national relationships have been kept rolling with arguments. Partnership inequality is a sensitive issue and a challenging goal in any society and organization, especially among cross-culturally conditioned groups. Primarily, the implementation of partnerships between missionaries and nationals in mission has frequently concentrated on the issue of power and hegemony.

During the 1970s, tension surfaced as the voice of "missionary moratorium."⁶ The distressing voices shocked the missionary sending nations, and mission organizations started reevaluating and recapturing the heart of missionary activity within the Church's mission theology, *Missio Dei*. Marsh (Marsh, 2003, 373) explains *Missio Dei* theology in partnership as follows:

Missio Dei theology sought to reconstruct mission as an activity of the Trinity in the world, with churches participating together in God's mission as partners. This was an activity that involved all members of the worldwide Church...in light of Missio Dei, the activity of mission was, therefore no longer to be

5. See my article on the issue: Park, Esther. "The Theology of Partnership: Equality Issues in the Ministry" *Asian Missions Advance* 44 (July 2014), 27-30.

6. One example was the voice from the Philippines: Nacpil, Emerito. "Mission but not Missionaries" *International Review of Mission* 60: 239 (July 1971), 356-362.

understood as a movement of the Church from Europe and the West to the rest of the world but as the action of all churches participating in God's one mission as equal partners: "partnership in mission."

Philippians 2:3, "in humility," is a challenging unilateral way of giving and receiving conventionalities in missions. Inequality in partnership issues has been recognized, yet not fully applied, and is a goal to be worked towards rather than a realized perception. 1 Peter 5:3, "don't lord it over the people assigned to your care," is also troublesome among leaders in the ministry. A plea from the evangelical national director of the Philippines (PCEC) shows the conflict and is yet far from the goal. "Be intentional in your partnership with Filipino Church leaders and workers regarding them as co-workers and not subjects in the ministry; treat Filipino workers as equal partners by allowing them to share in leadership and decision-making functions in your ministry."⁷ Ross (Ross, 2010, 145-148) answers some of the questions I mentioned above from the biblical foundation. First, that partnership is an idea essential to the very nature of God: Trinitarian God's unity and diversity. Second, that partnership speaks of God's relationship with humanity: love and respect. Even in the creation story, the relationship emphasizes freedom, not a forced relationship. Jesus dialogues with the Samaritan Woman at the well (John 4) and Nicodemus (John 3), and we find a model of love and respect. Third, that partnership indicates a genuine relationship between human beings. Ross continues equal partnership as Koinonia: partaking together in or having a share.

Gender Equality: Women Leadership In The Church

I do not permit a woman to teach or to have authority over a man; she must be silent (1 Tim 2:12) / There is neither Jew nor Greek . . . neither male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. (Gal 3:28, NIV)

To imply the Scriptures in our context, we should travel to the original historical and cultural background at the time the Scriptures were written. Therefore, it is necessary to examine the origins of the author's and his audience's experience: Judaism, Greco-Roman philosophy, Greek language, and society. We must consider several specifics in the New Testament epistles, such as a church's condition and socio-cultural background. For example, Koshy (Koshy, 2022, 532) deals with a presupposition in the letter to Timothy about the Church of Ephesus: it reflects Paul's pastoral oversight through his involvement in the crisis at Ephesus, and such an understanding gives insight into ministry in today's Asian context. I also can share my experience while working with the Presbyterian sectarian seminary in the Philippines, where strong foreign missionary

influences were dominant.⁸ Culturally speaking, Filipino society is bilateral and relatively egalitarian. The egalitarianism present in the Filipino family was rooted in pre-colonial times; however, foreign invasions changed the course. Friessen (Friessen, 1988, 3) mentions as:

The economic customs contributed to the autonomous stature of women within society; pre-colonial Philippines was also marked by relative sexual egalitarianism. Spanish law, however, stressed male superiority and emphasized that women belonged at home. The Roman Catholic Church taught passivity and piety as the proper traits for women. Furthermore, the American colonial experience reinforced economic control by men. Much of the pre-Hispanic culture is deeply overlaid by colonial culture.

No wonder Orthodox Presbyterianism (many views as ultra-conservative) was not popular in the country compared to Pentecostalism somewhat; women's leadership is prominent. However, this women's leadership issue is also a hot potato among missionaries and within Presbyterian circles in the Philippines. According to the female students, unequal treatment toward female M.Div. students, like not providing the same privilege of preaching and other ministerial opportunities as a male student, violates student rights since the school offers the program to female students. They gave vent to their feeling of resentment against these unfair treatments; I had heard their lamentations and felt bitterness.

Only one verse in the Bible explicitly prohibits women from teaching in the Church. Until today some Christians (denominational, too) view this verse as comprehensively declaring a universal and permanent ban on women teaching (preaching is more strict) over men. My experience working in the PCP (Presbyterian Church of the Philippines) encountered this issue as a full-time faculty member in its denominational seminary. A female professor teaches even ordained ministers in the classroom but was not allowed to preach in the chapel service. I thought it was absurd to embrace the controversial exegesis in the passage. If you follow this teaching as the absolute truth, allowing female teachers in seminary classrooms is contradictory and inconsistent. If you take 1 Timothy verses literally, then women in leadership, including the teaching of men, should be prohibited. Paul's writings about women have been cited throughout the centuries as authority for the notion that women are the deficient class in the kingdom of God and the Church (ongoing debate until now). However, the author of 1 Timothy, Paul, is not universalizing the exclusion of women from their teaching role.⁹ Koshy (Koshy, 2022, 532) provides three specifics we should consider to face difficult passages like this: cultural, Church, and language. For example, in both

7. This regrettable criticism by bishop Efraim Tendaro shook the Korean Missionary gathering (KWMA, 2012). See "Perspectives on the Korean Missions Ministry in the Philippines" in From Shandong Peninsular to Persia: A Century Old Korean Missionary Beyond, ed., Manila Forum (Mokpo, Korea: KWMA, 2012), 558.

8. This seminary was founded by Prebyterians from Korea and partnership with others like Presbyterian Church of America (PCA).

9. There are many evidences through Acts and Paul's epistles: Acts 18:26; Romans 16; Titus 2:2-3;

language and church-specific cases in 1 Timothy 2:12, “silence or quietness (ἡσυχία).” Padgett (Padgett, 1987, 23) uniquely states that “the wealthy women of Ephesus followed the false teachers, who taught that marriage was tainted and that one should neglect family duties.” Padgett rightly concludes the article by stating, “we have not found anything in these verses to indicate that women were not leaders in the early Church, nor anything that would limit their role in the Church today.” He continues by arguing that we cannot overlook the social context of the letters “when interpreting this pericope today.” Throughout the New Testament cases, neither Luke nor Paul (Acts and Pauline epistles—except 1 Timothy 2:13) disapproves of a godly woman teaching. Hamilton (Hamilton, 2000, 145) suggests that Priscilla’s teaching ability was highly regarded.¹⁰ He quotes the early Church Father John Chrysostom’s writing the reason why the list of the name “Greet Aquila and Priscilla (Romans 16:3, 2 Timothy 4:19), but “Priscilla and Aquila (Acts 18:26)” as follows:

He does not do this without reason, but he seems to me to acknowledge a greater godliness for her than her husband. What I said is not guesswork because it is possible to learn this from the Book of Acts. (Priscilla) took Apollos, an eloquent man and powerful in the Scriptures, but knowing only the baptism of John; and she instructed him in the way of the Lord and made him a teacher brought to completion.¹¹

Regardless of the time difference, God’s calling of Abraham and Sarah to Aquila and Priscilla confirms the complimentary leadership among His people. From Genesis to the New Testament era, the pairing of man and woman shows the sense of equal callings in their own narratives regardless of cultural-societal environments. Through those passages, we can detect the principle of the pairing. Let’s look into some of the examples.

- 1) As much Abraham was chosen to become a father of nations, Sarah was too, according to Genesis 17:15-16: “a mother of nations”
- 2) The godly old man (Simeon) and woman (Anna) in Luke 2 who were anticipating the coming Messiah also show the pairing stories
- 3) Priscilla and Aquila in Acts 18 show that both instruct Apollos about Christian doctrine together

CONCLUSION

I have discussed mainly three areas we can look

¹⁰. This switching of the list of the name has significant in Acts, where “Barnaba and Paul” becomes “Paul and Barnabas.” Barnabas name appears ahead of Paul until Paul becomes the dominant speaker from Acts 13:9 onwards: (Acts 13:43, 46,50; 15:22, 35, 36).

¹¹. Catherine Clark Kroeger, “John Chrysostom’s First Homily on the Greeting to Priscilla and Aquila” Pricilla Paper 5:3 (Summer 1991) ,16-20. One of the church’s outstanding Bible expositor John Chrysostom (died AD 407) preached consistently through the Scriptures, and many of his sermons are still extant. Here, for the first time in English translation available by Dr. Kroeger, quoted in Hamilton, 145.

into biblical themes in Asian contexts: conversion, sin, and equality. Overall, the discussion focus on the theological motif of the removal of shame and the restoration of honor. Since the Fall, humans experienced shame and guilt until Jesus Christ, who bears our sin and shame, enabled us to enter God’s family. However, 1 Peter’s believer’s new codes provide the checkpoints in Asian realities. Since Asians belong to the collective society, applying these new codes should be emphasized in the church as a new community. Wright (Wright, 2013, 132) points out that is why the challenge comes fresh to each generation: “traditions tell us where we have come from. Scripture is a better guide for where we should now be going.” The goal I placed in this paper is to stimulate us to think more carefully about our faith in our own setting.

In the beginning, I mentioned the description of Asia: the limitation on environments and characteristics. Therefore, the readers should bear this limitation in mind. Whatever and wherever we are placed, we will grow and pursue maturity as the children of God. I will conclude this paper with my favorite passage: Eph. 4:15, “Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will grow to become in every respect the mature body of him who is the head, that is, Christ.”

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