

ATA Theological Consultation: Emerging Insights and Action Plans

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The participants of ATA Theological Consultation 2017

Rejoice Always

There is much to rejoice about today – and of course, the apostle Paul is talking about a deep, inner joy that wells up from our salvation and calling in Jesus Christ. This joy should characterize all believers, including and especially Asian evangelical scholars. As evangelicals, to rejoice always is our best witness to the church and to the world, even to the larger community of Asian theologians and biblical scholars, a community in which we evangelical Asians are not always welcomed with open arms. But biblical joy is distinctive in that it is often found in contexts of suffering. Thus, in the Pauline corpus, the chair/chara word group is most often found in letters where affliction is front and

center. Asian theologians routinely highlight suffering as a defining experience of many Asians, and I want to bring that suffering close to home. We Asian evangelical scholars are an afflicted group with many challenges. Why is this so?

Lack of Role Models

The most difficult part of being an Asian evangelical scholar in biblical studies or theology is that we have precious few if any who embody and model contextualized evangelical scholarship for the rest of us. We know plenty of Asian scholars and plenty of Western evangelical scholars, but virtually none who have definitively integrated Asian and evangelical perspectives. We need more role models.

Pressure from All Sides

Speaking of Asian vs. evangelical role models, Asian evangelical scholars often must straddle the fence when it comes to being accepted by either hermeneutical community. Like the apostle Paul, we are a part of three worlds: the Asian context, the global evangelical community, and the global academic guild (according to our disciplines). Our scholarship is often viewed as too Western (not postcolonial enough) by Asian progressives, too biased by our context (not academically serious enough) by mainstream Western scholarship, and too liberal by the evangelicals. If we lean too far one way or the other, we risk falling into alienation. In the end, we receive little or no acknowledgement

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from any side that our contextual work is worthwhile.

Burden of Contextualization and Relevance

On top of the pressure from all sides, true contextualization that is relevant to the context is, to put it mildly, a daunting task. The Asian context is complex and constantly in flux. Plus, there are no accepted methods of reading the context or doing “exegesis of culture.”

Compared to our Western colleagues, we feel unfairly overwhelmed by the call to contextualize, which can lead to resentment (especially when well-meaning Westerners themselves tell us that we need to contextualize!). We Asian scholars feel that the burden of contextualization maybe a yoke on our necks that neither our Asian nor Western evangelical predecessors could bear.

Unrealistic Expectations

Throw in to the above mix of burdens and pressures, words and phrases like “integration of social sciences,” “multi-disciplinary,” “for the church,” “transcultural,” “prophetic,” “missional,” “transcending Western limitations,” “dialectical,” “grassroots,” “implicit vs. explicit,” “vernacular theology,” and “mature state of scholarship”—all of which have been used at this consultation—and we have so overwhelmed our Asian biblical scholars and theologians that they won’t touch contextualized scholarship with a ten-foot pole! Not only do we expect our Asian evangelical scholars to be experts in their respective fields, which is already hard enough to keep up with, but we are also asking them to be more practical, be competent in and incorporate other disciplines, be transcendent of Western and contextual patterns, and by the way, be spiritual and pastoral, too! Basically, we are asking Asian evangelicals to fix and correct everything that much of Western and contextual scholarship have done wrong! Are these expectations realistic?

Isolation (and Invisibility)

Moreover, isolation is a real problem for Asian evangelical scholars. So much so

that some are practically invisible. Some prefer to practice their scholarship in isolation, having been influenced by the Western ivory-tower model. Still others long for a community of like-minded scholars, but none are accessible to them in their regions. Still others are too busy engaging other communities such as the church, ministry or theological education communities. Indeed, it is almost compulsory for Asian evangelical scholars to be engaged in these other communities, which often substitute the scholarly one. This means that many Asian evangelical scholars practice their craft in virtual isolation from their scholarly peers.

Pray without Ceasing

The afflictions of Asian evangelical scholars offer some explanation as to why we have not made much progress since the 1970s. But can we find joy in the midst of this struggle? The answer is yes, of course, because our constant rejoicing does not depend on whether or not we suffer, or in our circumstances and contexts. It is grounded in God’s deep love for us in Jesus Christ, and this becomes the basis of the next exhortation—pray without ceasing. I like the way that Rico Villanueva emphasized “turning our writing and scholarship into a prayer” that proclaims, “Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.” At a compound called Jesus Abbey, the site of a Christian community in a remote part of South Korea, started by evangelical Anglicans, there is a plaque on one of the buildings which reads: “Prayer is labor and labor is prayer.” It is a reminder to all members and visitors to labor in prayer and to prayerfully labor. Exegetically, I am not suggesting that laboring is what Paul meant in this text, but I know that as a theologian and pastor, prayer is a labor for me; biblical exegesis comes easier. Put another way, it is hard for me to submit my scholarship to the Lordship of Christ because that is not necessarily what I was taught and modeled in the West. As an Asian evangelical scholar, I need to turn my scholarship into a prayer as a worshipful response to the self-revealing God. Saphir F. Athyal cogently proposed this back in 1976!

Let me share with you an action plan on how we must pray without ceasing as Asian evangelical scholars.

1. Keep working and producing

The three imperatives—*chairete* (rejoice), *proseuchesthe* (pray), *eucharisteite* (give thanks)—in the Greek present tense stress the continuous aspect. Thus, praying (and our prayerful scholarship) must be something we keep on doing. To emphasize this, Paul adds *pantote* (always), *adialeiptōs* (without ceasing), *en panti* (in all circumstances) in the emphatic positions, ahead of the verbs. So literally, it is “without ceasing, keep on praying.” I think this is an important action plan. Each of us, in a diversity of ways (as evidenced in our consultation), must persevere at contextualizing evangelical theology and biblical interpretation. Chip away at doing Asian theology, at Asian hermeneutics of Scripture, at making Scripture and theology relevant to Asia, at engaging grassroots issues in Asia, all from an evangelical perspective. There is a saying in Korea: “The journey of a thousand miles starts with one step.” I appreciate Tim Gener’s warning that unless there are new structures to facilitate the growth of Asian evangelical scholarship, we will be talking about the same thing 40 years from now. We need tireless, intentional, prayerful labor from the hermeneutical community of Asian evangelical scholars. So where do we start?

For Asian evangelical biblical scholars, (a) embrace and support the full spectrum of biblical studies in Asia. While we should encourage more intentionally Asian perspectives, we ought not discourage those who are part of the worldwide scholarly community as experts in their field, whether it is Hebrew language or textual criticism or other biblical expertise. (b) Develop an Asian evangelical hermeneutic. We need a concerted effort to develop and lay out an Asian hermeneutic that is distinctively evangelical. (c) Model Asian evangelical approaches. Let us try to do Asian evangelical readings of the Bible

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THEOLOGICAL CONSULTATION 2017: The Calling of an Asian Biblical Scholar/Theologian

Last July 18-20, 86 participants of various nationalities, all of whom serve the Asian Church, gathered together for the 2017 Theological Consultation. Together, they grappled with the theme, "The Calling of the Asian Biblical Scholar/Theologian: Challenges Facing Asian Evangelicals Today." This was graciously hosted by Seminari Alkitab Asia Tenggara (SAAT) in their very beautiful campus in Malang, Indonesia.

Grappling with the aforementioned issue began with a discussion on the article of Saphir F. Athyal entitled Toward an Asian Christian Theology, facilitated by Samuel Sidjabat. From there, several papers were presented to address the topic – both during the plenary and parallel sessions. The papers presented during the plenary sessions were as follows: (1) The Calling of an Asian Evangelical Scholar: A Biblical Scholar's Perspective by Federico Villanueva; (2) The Role of Asian Biblical Scholars as Prophets by Koowon Kim; (3) The Enthronement of the Son of Man and the Parable of Talents in the Gospel of Matthew 25 by Takanori Kobayashi; (4) Doing Contextual Systematic Theology in Asia: Challenges and Prospects by Timoteo Gener; and (5) A Call to Multi-disciplinary Approach to Doing Theology by Clive Chin. On the other hand, the papers presented during the parallel sessions were as follows: (1) Spotting the Sacred: Social Location as Frame for the Scholar's Vocation by Rolex Cailing; (2) Female Evangelical Scholars in Indonesia: A Crisis or Opportunity? by Dwi Maria Handayani; (3) Rethinking the Calling of Doctrinal Theologian in Light of Calvin's Concept of 'Doctrina' from a Korean Evangelical Theological Perspective by Sang Wha Han; (4) Postcolonial Reading of the Bible: An (Asian) Indonesian Evangelical Friend or Foe? by Ferry Y. Mamahit; and

(5) Cultural Exegesis as the Calling of an Asian Theologian by Varughese John. In conjunction to the papers presented, the participants were grouped per region to discuss the top pressing issues in their respective contexts and the ways by which the church can address the aforementioned, an activity facilitated by Dr. Theresa Lua.

After all the papers and group meetings, the participants wrestled with the question of where to go from here through a panel discussion facilitated by Varughese John with members of the panel including Rodrigo Tano, Andrew Prince, Martus Maleachi, and Daniel Owens. After which, there was one final session where the emerging insights and action plans gleaned from the consultation were presented and this was creatively done by Steve Chang.

Adding to color to this year's theological consultation was the launching of "Jesus Among the Nations," a book conceived from the Theological Consultation held in Korea last 2014 and edited by Federico Villanueva and Steve Pardue; and the launching of the new Asia Bible Commentary on Matthew, written by Samson Uytanlet. With the launching of these new publications of ATA was a cultural presentation, a showcase of traditional Indonesian music and dance. To cap off this year's Theological Consultation was Holy Communion.

While all the participants took home a number of different things, common to most of them was the need for multidisciplinary collaboration and dialogue – in other words, a community of learners from diverse disciplines coming together to converse about issues facing Evangelical Christians today. Having said that, it's not difficult to see that this may well be the beginning of even greater things in Asia and beyond!



Some participants during an ice breaker activity



Dr. Rico Villanueva for the opening evening session



Dr. Samuel Sidjabat facilitating the discussion of Saphir Atyal's article

Plenary Speakers



Dr. Koowon Kim



Dr. Takanori Kobayashi



Dr. Tim Gener



Dr. Clive Chin

Parallel Session Presenters



Dr. Varughese John



Dr. Sang Wha Han



Dr. Ferry Mamahit



Dr. Dwi Maria Handayani



Dr. Rolex Cailing



Dr. Theresa Lua facilitated the group meeting



The panel discussion wrestled with the question "Where do we go from here?"



Dr. Steve Chang creatively put forth the emerging insights and action plans gleaned from the theological consultation



Participants were grouped per region to discuss pertinent issues and challenges



Cultural Night



Book Launching: *Jesus Among the Nations* and *ABC Matthew*



The theological consultation closed with the celebration of Communion led by Dr. Adonis Goraspe and a message from Dr. Tony Lim

and see what happens. We probably need multiple approaches and debate the merits of each. In so doing, we will leave models for the Asian evangelicals who will come after us.

For Asian evangelical theologians, (a) reorganize systematic theology (ST) with the Asian context in mind, producing an Asian evangelical theology textbook. Asian ST textbooks “should let their particular contexts decide what particular area of faith should receive special emphasis and perhaps serve as the point which leads to the exposition of the full scope of the field” (Gener). We need new confessions and catechisms from the Asian context, stressing elements of Christian theology that are most pressing and important for Asians. (b) Affirm evangelical theology for Asian contexts. There is among Asians a tendency to leave to assumption our evangelical confessions/convictions. Or, perhaps there is a deferring to our evangelical Western counterparts to define for us what it means to be evangelical today. Yet, we need deeply committed Asian theologians to affirm evangelical beliefs and confessions for the rest of us in Asia. (c) Model interdisciplinary approaches. Asian evangelical theologians should develop methods of cultural exegesis and help Asians become more relevant. Further, they should show us how to integrate the social sciences and missiology with theology and biblical studies. It is difficult to find evangelical theologians and biblical scholars in Asia who integrate well.

2. Nurture a hermeneutical community

Many Westerners and young, globalized Asians might read 1 Thessalonians 5:16-18 as addressing the individual, but these three imperatives are plural in number. In other words, rejoicing, praying, and giving thanks are to be collective activities. Asians, many point out, are more communal, like the ancient Thessalonians. Villanueva suggests, “...we know for a fact that the Bible is Asian... it has many similarities

with Asian cultures (e.g., communal emphasis, spirituality, poverty, etc.)” Rather than being content simply to be alone in our study, we Asian evangelical scholars need to do scholarship together. Villanueva talked about consciously establishing a “hermeneutical community,” and I believe we are on the right track with this consultation. But we also need to meet and collaborate regularly, according to our disciplines and across the disciplines. This is the way to make Scripture and theology our own (as Athyal suggests).

For Asian evangelical biblical scholars and theologians, (a) dialogue and engage (i) with our contexts. Engage church and society with issues that matter, such as poverty, human trafficking, globalization, nationalism, radicalism, LGBT (Lesbian, Bisexual, Gay, Transgender), secularism, among others. Dialogue and engage (ii) with each other. Engage the local community of scholars in an interdisciplinary way. Engage the global community of evangelical scholars, especially from the Global South. (iii) We will need follow-up consultations on the national and regional scale, perhaps on-line. (b) Collaborate around responding to the challenges identified in this consultation. (i) Collaborate across boundaries within your contexts, be it church-society, political, denominational, etc. (ii) Collaborate across Asian contexts, from Southeast to Northeast to South Asia, to dialogue about what it means to be an Asian evangelical today. (iii) Collaborate across disciplines applied to Asian contexts, between theology, missiology, social sciences, etc. (c) Invest in the 3Ps. (i) Invest in people, that is, in Asian evangelical scholars. (ii) Invest in publications. Publish or perish is a collective reality in Asia because we need the community of Asian evangelical scholars to publish or the church, its mission, and theological education in Asia may perish. (iii) Invest in pupils, that is, in theological education in Asia to raise up a new generation of Asian evangelical scholars.

Give Thanks

Finally, there is much to give thanks for today. I was asked by the consultation staff, “What is the major take-away from this conference?” Besides the 1kg. of delicious Indonesian coffee, the main take-away is the community of Asian evangelical scholars we are a part of and how important and encouraging it is that we are not alone in the daunting task of evangelical contextualization in Asia. I am so grateful to be a part of this community, who not only are competent in so many different fields but who also love the Lord and his Church! Thus, we firstly give thanks to God for our community of Asian evangelical scholars.

Secondly, we give thanks for the task and calling we have as Asian evangelical scholars. We do not work hard, research, write and publish for the sake of scholarly knowledge, nor for the sake of reputation and recognition, nor for a salary and career. We labor for the sake of the mission of the church and to proclaim well the gospel to a constantly changing Asia. As a matter of worship, giving thanks to God is an explicit rejection of idolatry, realizing that it is God who enables and gives meaning to our scholarship.

Finally, we give thanks to God for our common faith and confession. We are not merely a community of theologians and biblical scholars who are united by our craft and profession, but we are also part of a larger, global community united by the confession that Jesus Christ is the only hope for the world. By “give thanks in all circumstances,” Paul has in mind the only appropriate response to the God of the gospel. Our thanksgiving is not determined by our circumstances, neither by our successes nor by our failures in our desire to contextualize our theology and biblical studies in Asia. In the end, it is God’s sending of his Son for which we give thanks and in which our scholarship has meaning. Let us give thanks to God for Jesus Christ. ■

ATAVET Teams Visit Three Member Schools in Asia



Bandung Theological Seminary

Over the months of May, June, and July, the ATA Visiting Evaluation Teams visited three different theological institutions, one per month. These institutions were the Bandung Theological Seminary, Indonesia (May 17-19); Asia Theological Center, Singapore (June 28-30); and Logos Theological Seminary, Taiwan (July 4-6).

Bandung Theological Seminary (BTS), whose mission is to prepare pastor-scholars/scholar-pastors for the churches of the 21st century, was visited by Dr. Chiu Eng Tan, Academic Dean of the Biblical Seminary of the Philippines, Dr. George Capaque, Dean of Discipleship Training Center in Singapore, and Dr. Samuel Sidjabat, President of Tyrannus Bible Seminary. Having opened in 1992 to fill the need for a graduate level Reformed seminary in Indonesia, BTS began with a Bachelor of Theology and Master of Divinity



Asia Theological Center

programs. Today, BTS has seven programs, including a Master of Theology (M.Th), for the equipping of his people called to pastoral, professional, urban and education ministries. They have likewise seen a growing ethnic diversity among their students.

Asia Theological Center (ATC) was on the other hand visited by Dr. Ng Peh Cheng, Associate Secretary of Accreditation and Development of ATA, Dr. Tony Lim, Vice Principal/Academic Dean of Malaysia Bible Seminary, and Dr. Sunny Tan, Dean of Malaysia Baptist Theological Seminary. ATC envisions the equipping for the effective ministry of the Gospel, having graduates ready to undertake the task of missions – either as a goer or sender. They seek to provide opportunities for educational advancement with a charismatic setting in order for the student to develop both in their



Logos Theological Seminary

academics and in the personal giftings.

Finally, Logos Theological Seminary (LTS) was visited by Dr. Ng Peh Cheng, Associate Secretary of Accreditation and Educational Development of ATA, Dr. Lily K. Chua, Dean of Students of China Evangelical Seminary, and Shikai Ronnie Poon, Academic Dean, Alliance Biblical Seminary, Hong Kong. LTS came to existence in 2003 and was then named Kaohsiung Bread of Life Seminary (KBLs) and was meant to train those sent by the Kaohsiung Bread of Life Church. KBLs, in 2006, was then renamed to Logos Theological Seminary for it to be non-denominational. Yet despite that, the motto has always been Acts 20:24, "However I consider my life worth nothing to me; my only aim is to finish the race and complete the task the Lord Jesus has given me- the task of testifying to the good news of God's grace." ■

VET Visits a School in Australia



Brisbane School of Theology (BST) was visited on July 26-28 by Dr. Theresa Lua (General Secretary, ATA), Dr. Graham Simpson (visiting faculty, South Asia Institute of Advanced Christian Studies, Bangalore, India), and Dr. Calvin Chong (Faculty, Singapore Bible College).

The school was established in 1943

originally as Queensland Bible Institute then became Bible College of Queensland, then Crossway College and now Brisbane School of Theology. BST offers awards from diploma level to doctorate. All of its programs are accredited through the Australian College of Theology (ACT). In 2011, BST was granted ATA accreditation for its Chinese program.

A significant development in BST is the establishment of the Centre of Asian Christianity (CAC) which seeks to equip and resource Christian for effective contextual Asian ministry through collaboration and dialogue with Asian Christian leaders. Another is a partnership with an East Asia-based training program in Christian Counseling.

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