

ASSEMBLIES OF GOD THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

Toward an Indigenous Pentecostal Theology of Worship

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by

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## *Introduction*

“Christianity is a vernacular faith.”<sup>1</sup> The chief means of expressing any religion is through a process of worship. Expressions of worship must reflect the victories, sufferings, and longings of the people who offer it as worship to God. So much contemporary worship teaching is Western in nature. Unfortunately, an attempt is being made to bring the musical influence and theology of Western worship into other cultures without cultivating the process from within the local context. It is critical that any expression of worship be an expression of those within a cultural setting, not something imported. Worship must flow from within a people’s understanding of who God is, what His intentions for their lives may be, what His Word teaches regarding proper indigenous worship, and how a people might best express that understanding.

The following research is a culmination and further development of an ongoing study and will include some material gleaned and adapted from previous unpublished papers.<sup>2</sup> It will not be possible in this research project to answer all the questions posed when considering an indigenous approach to worship theology. In fact, it is not possible to know all the questions that may arise. However, an honest attempt is made to stimulate serious dialogue and further research.

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<sup>1</sup> Melba Padilla Maggay, “Early Protestant Missionary Efforts in the Philippines: Some Intercultural Issues,” in *Asian Church and God’s Mission*, ed. Wonsuk Ma and Julie C. Ma (West Caldwell, NJ: Mountain World Mission, 2003), 29.

<sup>2</sup> Richard A. Pruitt, “Towards a Functional Theology,” and “A Biblical Theology of Worship,” (Theology paper, Foundations of Biblical Theology, AGTS, 2004); “Toward an Indigenous Theology of Worship in an Asian Context,” (Theology paper, Theology of Mission, AGTS, 2004).

This study will approach a worship theology process from two broad perspectives. First, a general consideration will be given to a meaningful development of theological process. All theology should be practical. Gordon Fee refers to this as “worthwhile theology.”<sup>3</sup> I call this *functional* theology. After outlining this process, I will consider several aspects vital to developing a practical *indigenous* teaching of Pentecostal worship theology and practice in a cross-cultural setting.

### *Developing a Functional Theological Process*

In the course of any biblical study, it is important to remember that a theological approach (1) is subjective, (2) requires faith and certain assumptions, (3) is culturally bound, (4) never remains completely static, (5) is dependent on the Holy Spirit, (6) is dependent on a belief in the inspiration and trustworthiness of the canonicity of the Scriptures, and (7) must become functional.

### A Theological Approach is Subjective

A person’s worldview ultimately affects his understanding of the scriptures. It is not possible to be purely objective when interpreting the Bible.<sup>4</sup> For this reason a person must approach a study of the scriptures cautiously. “All of us bring to the Bible pre-understandings and pre-dispositions which affect what we make of what we read.”<sup>5</sup> For good biblical theology, “the primary goal of exegesis is not objectivity [*per se*] but to

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<sup>3</sup> Gordon D. Fee, *Paul, the Spirit, and the People of God* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1996), 2. “The only worthwhile theology, after all, is one that is translated into life, [it is] ultimately a matter of lived-out faith.”

<sup>4</sup> Rudolf Bultmann, “Is Exegesis without Presuppositions Possible?” in *Existence and Faith*, ed. Shubert M. Ogden (London: Hodder and Stoughton Publishers, 1961), 289-296.

<sup>5</sup> Brian S. Rosner, “Biblical Theology,” in *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, eds. Desmond T. Alexander, et al., (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000), 5.

hear Scripture as the word of God.”<sup>6</sup> Our theology is often shaped by our ideology. However, the opposite must occur. “The task of biblical theology is to present the teaching of the Bible about God and his relations to the world in a way that lets the biblical texts set the agenda.”<sup>7</sup> This kind of study will lead a person to understand God’s intention for the biblical text. Although all theologians are subjective to one degree or another, simply being aware of this fact—and accepting it—can serve to safeguard single-focused thinking in the extreme.

### A Theological Approach Requires Faith and Certain Assumptions

A written text assumes a certain kind of audience will read it. This person or group is best disposed to make sense of the writing. In literature, this recipient is the implied reader. In the case of the Bible, the implied or model readers are those who care about what the texts assert and affirm. Such readers approach the witness of God’s work in Jesus Christ, even though they “have not seen” (1 Pet 1:8),<sup>8</sup> with an openness to believe. The best approach in theological study is to read the Bible as a *Christian*, that is, one who welcomes the witness of Scripture to what God was and is doing in Christ. It is not only right, but also essential, to approach the Scriptures with “eyes of faith.”<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> All Scripture quotations will be from the NIV unless otherwise noted.

<sup>9</sup> David S. Dockery, *Biblical Interpretation: Then and Now* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker book House, 1992), 178. “[The interpreter] must approach the text with right presuppositions, which Augustine identified as faith.”

No attempt is made in Scripture to prove the reality of God.<sup>10</sup> The Bible simply begins with this statement, “In the beginning, God...” (Gen 1:1) Throughout its pages, the narrative assumes the reader accepts that God is real and that its pages reveal Divine truth. “The biblical theologian makes no apology for his or her explicitly theological assumptions about the nature and identity of God.”<sup>11</sup>

### A Theological Approach is Culturally Bound

The culture in which we live determines the manner in which we interpret Scriptures. It is surprising how few Western theologians are willing to admit this. Having traveled abroad several times, I am constantly reminded that non-Westerners do not process information (*i.e.*, think) like Westerners. In fact, not all Western cultures think in similar terms, nor do Middle Easterners reason in the same fashion as people who live *further* east on the Asian continent or south on the African continent. Ironically, it seems as though this truth is accepted in every respect of learning except in theological and exegetical concerns.

For example, many Western (German, British, and North American) theologians<sup>12</sup> insist that a text may only have one meaning and that the meaning is explicitly restricted

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<sup>10</sup> George Eldon Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing Company, Revised edition, 1993), 20. “Since biblical theology is concerned with self-revelation of God and with redemption of women and men, the very idea of revelation and redemption involves certain presuppositions that are everywhere implicit and often explicit in the Bible. These presuppositions are God, humanity, and sin. The reality of God is everywhere assumed. The Bible is not concerned to prove God or to discuss theism in a philosophical manner. It assumes a personal powerful, self-existent being who is creator of the world and of humankind, and who is concerned about humanity.”

<sup>11</sup> Rosner, 5.

<sup>12</sup> Cf., F. E. D. Schleiermacher, *Hermeneutics: The Handwritten Manuscripts*, ed. H. Kimmerie, trans. James Duke and H. J. Fostman (Missoula, MT: Scholars Publishing, 1977); E. D. Hirsch, Jr., *Validity in Interpretation* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1967); and Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., *Toward an Exegetical Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1981).

to the author's original intention. They attempt to cover any obvious discrepancies<sup>13</sup> by drawing a fine distinction between the words "meaning," "application," and "significance."<sup>14</sup> However, what *one* meaning would be selected? Could it be a meaning determined by one specific language group over the interpretation of another? Or, stated in another way, would it be a meaning determined by an African person reading a Middle Eastern author or a European/Western person reading a Middle Eastern author?

From a cultural perspective the biblical writers would have accepted that what they were writing might very well possess more than one meaning. One method of appropriating Scripture for some Jews, particularly Jews from Qumran, was the concept of *peshet*. The presupposition is that the text contains a mystery known by an inspired interpreter (*i.e.*, someone later would have the information necessary to understand the full meaning of a prophetic utterance). A classic example of this is Peter's interpretation of Joel 2:28 in Acts 2:17, when he declares "...this is that..." Another common cultural understanding among Jewish rabbis and writers is that of *Midrash* (*e.g.*, the bringing of texts together—*proof text-ing*—to provide explanation). An example of this is Paul's linking of several Old Testament verses in Galatians 3:8-14 for one common point.<sup>15</sup> Each of these examples would be common to the first-century thinker but not necessarily obvious centuries later.

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<sup>13</sup> Such as the numerous instances in which NT writers *re-interpret* an OT text. For example, Matthew's (2:18) use of Jeremiah 31:15 as a prophecy of Herod's slaying of the innocent babies, while Jeremiah's words relate to the Babylonian invasion of Judea.

<sup>14</sup> E.D. Hirsch, *Validity in Interpretation* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1967), xi, 8; quoted in Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., *Toward Exegetical Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1981), 32.

<sup>15</sup> Klyne Snodgrass, "The Use of the Old Testament in the New," in *Interpreting the New Testament: Essays on Methods and Issues*, eds. David A. Black and David S. Dockery, (Nashville, TN:

I have read numerous non-Western theologians.<sup>16</sup> In contrast to European and North American culture, with its emphasis on individualism, the rest of the world approaches theological concepts from a relational perspective. This fundamental difference in perspective alters the manner in which theological premise is determined.

Theological understanding must take into consideration the impact other worldviews might have on a correct understanding of a passage and it is important to acknowledge that a cultural mindset affects interpretation. Theologians must not only understand the differences in culture between first-century and twenty-first century thinkers and the affect that difference plays on interpretation,<sup>17</sup> but they must also strive to understand the differences between cultures within the same century and the affect that plays on a global understanding of a biblical text.

I believe it is possible for theologians from different cultures to derive a similar

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Broadman and Holman Press, 2001), 218-219. Here the Apostle Paul links verses from the Pentateuch, the Prophets, and Wisdom literature.

<sup>16</sup> Cf., Che Bin Tan, "Constructing a Theology of Mission for the Chinese Church," and Tite Tenou, "Themes in African Theology of Mission," in *The Good News of the Kingdom*, ed. Charles Van Engen, Dean S. Gilliland, and Paul Pierson (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1993). Bong Rin Ro, "Contextualization: Asian Theology," and Kazoh Kitamori, "Theology of the Pain of God," in *What Asian Christians are Thinking*, ed. Douglas J. Elwood (Philippines: Publishers Association of the Philippines, Inc., 1978). Samuel Rayan, "A Reflection on Worship," in *Third World Theologies*, ed. K. C. Abraham (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1990). Cyril Okorochoa, "The Meaning of Salvation: An African Perspective," and Kwame Bediako, "Jesus in African Culture," in *Emerging Voices in Global Christian Theology*, ed. William A. Dyrness, et al., (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1994). G. C. Oosthuizen, *Theological Battleground in Asia and Africa*, (New York, NY: Humanities Press, 1972). Wonsuk and Julie C. Ma, *Asian Church and God's Mission* (West Caldwell, NJ: Mountain World Mission, 2003). Hwa Yung, *Mangoes or Bananas? The Quest for an Authentic Asian Theology* (Irvine, CA: Regnum Books International, 1997).

<sup>17</sup> David Rhoads, et al., *Mark as Story* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1999), 113. Rhoads explains how first century people could more readily believe in both human responsibility and divine causation. "As moderns, we tend to think that either God or humans should be considered responsible, but not both. For the ancients, it was both."

meaning from a text.<sup>18</sup> Nevertheless, I endeavor to keep in mind that my mid-western background rarely works in my favor when interpreting a portion of Scripture written “a long, long time ago in a place far, far away.”

### A Theological Approach Never Remains Static

A theological approach never remains static because revelation is progressive in nature. The canon of Scripture is complete but the revelation of God is an on-going process because our understanding is progressive. It is progressive for individuals, people groups, and the Church. As an individual, I am growing and maturing in my understanding of God. People groups develop and “times change.” The Church grows in its understanding of God. It builds upon the theological discoveries of previous generations and, at times, makes a quantum leap in biblical understanding. E. N. Bell, the first superintendent of the Assemblies of God, said, “We must keep our skylights open so as not to reject any new light God may throw upon the old Word. We must not fail to keep pace in life or teaching with light from heaven.”<sup>19</sup>

I possessed “good” study skills when I graduated from Bible college twenty years ago. However, as I have matured I have learned new and more challenging techniques of study that I have added to my study approach. These skills have continued to improve and develop as I learn new and exciting things pertaining to the Christ, His Word, and His church. The theological approach of any honest scholar never remains static. It is

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<sup>18</sup> Cf., T. Wayne Dye, “Toward a Cross-Cultural Definition of Sin,” in *Perspectives on the World Christian Movement*, Third edition, ed. Ralph D. Winter and Steven C. Hawthorne (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 1999), 469-473.

<sup>19</sup> E. N. Bell and J. R. Flower, “In Doctrines,” *The Christian Evangel*, 1 August 1914, 2; quoted in Edith L. Blumhofer, *The Assemblies of God: A Chapter in the Story of American Pentecostalism*, vol. 1, Springfield, MO: Gospel Publishing House, 1989), 209.

always maturing.

### A Theological Approach is Dependent on the Holy Spirit

The acquisition of dynamic spiritual knowledge is not a human process; rather it is a Divine process.<sup>20</sup> Spiritual knowledge is knowledge imparted by the Holy Spirit. This knowledge is not acquired through, though it may accompany, mental discipline. It is a *eureka* moment, the “I’ve found it!” or the “that’s it!” moment when someone discovers truth. In theological matters, it is the discovery of spiritual truth. It is dynamic in that it is alive or real. This is living truth exploding into a person’s life. It is truth that changes the way a person lives; a life-altering revelation. Perhaps the lack of this dynamic is why many scholars seem to lose their faith in the trustworthiness of the Scriptures, belief in miracles, the authenticity of Jesus’ words, or the biblical claim of who Jesus is. They are learning with their minds; however, their spirit man is unfruitful. They are “always learning but never able to acknowledge the truth” (2 Tim 3:7).

The Holy Spirit reveals spiritual truth with spiritual words to the human spirit (1 Cor 2:10-16). It is not a mental process. Failure to grasp and accept this fundamental concept dooms the process of theological understanding.<sup>21</sup> The mind can learn facts and assimilate information. It can put those facts into a logical and useful format. But the discovery of *spiritual* truth— understanding the biblical concepts of salvation,

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<sup>20</sup> A careful study of I Cor 2:10-16 has proved invaluable to my understanding in this matter.

<sup>21</sup> Dockery, 181. “The idea of illumination as enablement for understanding the text in this manner (see 1 Cor 2:10-16) has at times disappeared from the contemporary discussion. We are suggesting that discovering Scripture’s meaning involves not only examining the author’s result in the written text, but also the Holy Spirit’s work of illuminating the reader’s mind to interpret the text. With the enablement of the Spirit, discerning a text’s meaning and significance is not only possible but plausible. That a text may have deeper meanings, especially in genres like parables and poetry, is implied, but objective meaning is nevertheless present and discoverable.”

regeneration, sanctification, resurrection, worship, etc.—is a spiritual process. Only after the spirit comes to accept spiritual truth can the mind begin to understand and process it.<sup>22</sup>

Very few theological “how-to” books even mention this critical role of the Holy Spirit in the discovery of theological truth. Many scholars claim that spiritual discovery is not subject to established criteria of learning or study and it lacks safeguards. However, this is absolutely the missing link in all theological studies. Knowledge of any subject related to theology occurs in the spirit of man, not the mind. There is a difference between knowledge and understanding. With our minds we come to understand (although this process often occurs much later) what we have come to know in our spirit (1 Cor 2:11-12, 16; 1 John 3:20, 27).

#### A Theological Approach is Dependent on the Inspiration of the Scriptures

There is a widespread view that the decision of certain theologians and bishops of the earliest Christian centuries created the canon of Scripture. Because of that, some scholars hold that their decision cannot be binding upon later generations.<sup>23</sup> Such a claim challenges the focus of biblical theology on the canonical writings. In response to this challenge, “arguments may be advanced for an early beginning to the process of ‘canonization’, and for a ‘canonical awareness’ on the part of the early Christians long before the fourth century, even if they did not use the term ‘canon’ to refer to a list of

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<sup>22</sup> Watchman Nee, *The Spiritual Man*, Vol. 2 (New York, NY: Christian Fellowship Publishers, Inc., 1968), 67-85.

<sup>23</sup> That is, decisions based upon the *agenda* of fourth century theologians.

sacred writings until then.”<sup>24</sup> It would be a fabrication of facts to suggest that the fourth-century Church invented the Bible to satisfy its own agenda.

The Church did not create the canon<sup>25</sup> but it did officially recognize the authority of the New Testament writings in a process that began in the first century.<sup>26</sup> The focus of New Testament theology on the canonical writings can be justified historically.<sup>27</sup> The Bible is the written Word of God. The conviction that Scripture is the word of God was the undisputed tradition of the church until the seventeenth century. There have always been doubters of the inspiration of God’s word. To attack the reliability or value of the canonization process is a common occurrence in higher critical methodology.<sup>28</sup> It is vital to accept the inspiration of the Scriptures and to accept the canonization process as part of *God’s* process to produce the Divine text. It is a living Word and its truth continues to remain relevant “yesterday, today, and forever” (Heb 13:8).

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<sup>24</sup> Rosner, 3.

<sup>25</sup> The Scriptures are a “creation of the Church” only in the sense of organizing the apostolic and OT texts into a single cohesive book. Authentic writings were determined and spurious writings (or forgeries) were eliminated. The process of canonization is itself miraculous and should be considered part of the inspiration process.

<sup>26</sup> Rosner, 28. “The earliest Christian lists of the OT and NT, those of Melito and the Muratorian Fragment respectively, both date from the second century A.D., and the earliest Jewish list of the Hebrew Scriptures, found in a primitive tradition or *baraita* quoted in the Babylonian Talmud (*Bab Bathra 14b*), is probably older still.”

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 24.

<sup>28</sup> There is an inclination to focus attention on the editorial process when interpretive questions arise. Few scholars are prepared to attack the credibility of any prophet or apostle directly. Instead, they discredit his writings by attacking the editor(s) or the canonization process. This is a compelling observation and not without meaning for our own time. However, the tactic has been around since the time of the biblical writings. Walter Brueggemann, when addressing the attack on Baruch in Jer 43:1-3 states, “Since there are losers and outsiders to the canonical verdict, they [anyone who may possess an issue with the text] do what they can to discredit both the process and the outcome.” (*To Build, To Plant: A Commentary on Jeremiah 26-52* [Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1991], 186.)

