

Introduction

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THIS COLLECTION OF ESSAYS arises from a commitment to the belief that evangelicalism continues to provide the historical assets and intellectual (hermeneutical and theological) tools for the global church. Evangelicalism possesses assets with explanatory power able to address significant theological and cultural issues arising out of the churches in the global south. We believe evangelical approaches to contextualization and biblical studies can produce valuable fruit. One such issue is that of identity. In May 2008 over a dozen evangelical scholars, Chinese and Western, from the United States, Hong Kong, and Taiwan, came together to address issues of Christian and evangelical identity. The “Inter-Cultural Theological Conversation” was titled, “Beyond Our Past: Bible, Cultural Identity, and the Global Evangelical Movement.” This collection of papers from the conference demonstrates the value of the careful balancing of judicious appropriation of the social sciences and thorough biblical inquiry. Questions of evangelical identity in China and around the world are addressed through the disciplines of history, biblical studies, and systematic theology/contextualization.

The first section on history contains four papers. Douglas Sweeney leads off the collection with incisive insights into the history of evangelicalism, its continuing value in the contemporary world, and its future utility in an increasingly global church. Ka Lun Leung provides a Chinese perspective on the historical background to the introduction of Protestant Christianity into China. He shows the close ties between the Christian missions movement and the growth of imperialism in China, and spells out the long-term consequences in the life of Chinese Christians and churches as a result of linking missions and imperial-

ism. Richard Cook acknowledges the historic ties Protestant missions has with Western imperialism, but goes on to ask how those ties were formed. Looking at the lives of Robert Morrison and Liang Fa, he presents a sympathetic interpretation for missionary involvement in the political activities surrounding the Opium War and the Nanjing Treaty in the late 1830s and early 1840s. Kevin Yao concludes the historical section with an article demonstrating how house churches in China may now be moving beyond traditional limitations. Yao suggests that the evangelical house churches in China may now, starting in the 1990s, be moving beyond their aversion that emerged in the 1920s to social and political involvement. Yao examines Chinese evangelicalism profitably through the lens of social action. He starts by noting the complex history of evangelical involvement in social action, and then turns to the story in the Chinese churches.

The second section is foundational: five articles focused on the Bible. Lawson Younger opens the biblical section of this collection with a clarion call for attention to the context. Younger notes that many in missions and intercultural studies have argued persuasively for attention to the modern context, yet he believes the biblical context deserves equal attention. In order to comprehend Scripture in the multiple contexts of the emerging global churches, Younger argues we must learn to attend to the Ancient Near Eastern cultures of the biblical texts.

The biblical section next includes two papers on the provocative biblical themes of Holy War. Tremper Longman puts the issues of Holy War into a coherent framework. He identifies five phases of “Holy War” and argues that today we live in the fourth phase, “Jesus fights spiritual enemies.” Some thought-provoking questions Longman addresses include: What is the moral ground to take the land and kill all the people (*hèrem*)? How are these Old Testament texts relevant today? Longman concludes that Holy War is not applicable in the redemptive age. David Pao picks up the discussion of Holy War in the New Testament (focusing on the divine warfare motif in Acts, Ephesians, and Revelation). Pao specifically locates his discussion of Holy War in the context of the colonial and post-colonial eras, and provocatively provides a prophetic critique of “both the dominant power and those who see themselves as victims.” Thus, the “conquest narratives can fulfill their prophetic function in calling all nations to repent and acknowledge the one and universal Lord of all.”

In the fourth paper in the biblical section, Frank Thielman addresses issues of biblical scholarship in the West that have correlated ramifications on the churches in the global south. Some recent observers believe North American scholarship has been unduly influenced by American individualism at the expense of a more biblical collectivism. The thinking goes, then, that this imbalanced view of individualism has been passed on to more collectivist cultures through the western missions movement. Through attentive exegesis, Thielman counters that “there is an indelibly individual element in the gospel as Paul explains it, and that this individual element is as important as the social element in Paul’s soteriology.” Thielman calls on Christians from both the West and the majority world to strive to find the balance between individualism and collectivism found in the biblical texts.

Maureen Yeung, in the fifth paper, anchors her study of the question of Chinese Christian identity in the New Testament as she tackles one of the perennial problems faced by Chinese Christians: ancestor rites. Based on careful exegesis, she urges a nuanced approach stressing both that ancestor practices “should never be seen as good works meriting salvation,” yet “cultural elements which are not idolatrous should be respected.”

The third and final section includes three case studies of contextual theology. First, from the perspective of anthropology and intercultural studies, Robert Priest looks at several relevant questions of contextualization for the Chinese context. Priest’s central case study is a perceptive examination of the “dragon.” Priest questions whether the Chinese word for “dragon (*long*)” appropriately translates the biblical term “dragon” in the New Testament. While there are some similarities in the description of the biblical dragon and the Chinese dragon, Priest, after meticulous (and often witty) investigation, concludes that the association of the dragon in Revelation with the Chinese *long* is problematic, creating potentially unnecessary dislocations between Chinese and Christian identities. Priest encourages fidelity to the Bible and the appropriate use of the social sciences to address thorny questions of identity and contextualization.

David Lee moves the discussion to the positive development of a contextual Chinese theology, and calls for the comprehensive utilization of multiple sources. Lee looks at the comparative history of the contextualization of Christianity, Judaism, and Islam in China, the contemporary

insights of theologian Kevin Vanhoozer, and Chinese wisdom literature. He aims to “triangulate” the various sources to provide a robust Chinese Christology. Lee affirms, at the same time, that the Bible is still at the center. As Lee writes, “Without undermining the *sola Scriptura* principle, this paper asserts that it is possible to construct a Chinese theology that regards Chinese culture as an interpretative tool or communication vehicle that may be “allied” with the Bible.” Lee finds help from Chinese wisdom in avoiding a narrow understanding of Christ that has emerged in the West. He writes, “Rather than indiscriminately importing nineteenth- and twentieth-century Western religious thought, Chinese Christian interpreters and cultural agents may explore the God-man—the human and divine Christ—as the pivotal stand on which they can triangulate Scripture, culture, and the world of wisdom.”

Carver Yu, writing on theological education, provides a fitting concluding chapter to this collection of papers. Yu begins with a broad overview of the current context of theological education. He highlights the growing secularization of Europe and the West (“global north”), and contrasts that with the rapid expansion of Christianity in Asia, Africa, and Latin America (“global south”). After discussing definitions of church, theology, and theological education, he dives into the question of evangelical identity and the task of theological education in a global context. He writes, “Fluid identity and the loss of inwardness is the hallmark of our age. . . . Theological students coming into seminaries today can be expected to have been deeply affected by such fragmented identity.” Yu then creatively draws on the Asian context to advance three proposals for theological education: 1) Restoring piety in the loss of inwardness. Drawing on Chinese theologians and the Chinese classics, Yu writes, for instance, “Theology needs to recover the long forgotten practice of ‘emptiness, unity of knowing and being, quietude’ in the Chinese tradition.” 2) Theological education with a missional orientation. Yu notes that while the western missions movement was on “drastic retreat following World War II, with a deep sense of guilt and remorse,” the post-1949 churches in China imbibed the “missional orientation of faith left behind by the missionaries” which has “proved to be highly explosive.” 3) Prophetic critique of culture. Yu asks some provocative questions, such as: Can we as evangelicals send students not just to seminary, but also to study the “theology of economics, aiming prophetically at the Chicago School of Economics?” After mentioning an array of current philosophi-

cal, economic, political and cultural issues, Yu concludes, “Theological education must empower future ministers to be able to think through these issues.”

This “intercultural dialog” in Hong Kong among scholars from China and the West brought rich insights into the Bible, theology, and the future of evangelicalism. We came away encouraged that evangelicals could continue to contribute to the global churches and help pave the way for an evermore fruitful global theological discourse. In their papers, several of the contributors provide optimistic assessments of the future role of global evangelicalism. Douglas Sweeney concludes his paper, “Perhaps Chinese evangelicals will lead the way in showing their brothers and sisters in God’s family how to contextualize the faith without domesticating it—how to render the faith their own without repeating the sins of the past and universalizing their social and cultural preferences.” David Lee adds, “Indeed, there is an urgent need to construct or reinherit an evangelical Chinese theology. . . . The role of the church is vital in the process of contextualizing the Christian message. In the end, the mission of the Christian church in China is to demonstrate that the world of wisdom is found only in the person and work of Jesus Christ who is both the Divine Wisdom and holy sage.”

Robert Priest concludes with an urgent call to the global churches, “I believe that Chinese and Africans and Indians and Koreans need theologians who are addressing the distinctive identity challenges and opportunities provided within their own contexts out of a deep understanding of Scripture, but also out of profound skills in understanding the cultures both of their own societies and of the societies that first mediated the gospel to them. . . . [W]hen Chinese evangelical theologians, while retaining a deep knowledge of Scripture and submission to its authority, also direct their efforts towards contextual challenges of identity—honing their own skills in studying and exegeting culture, and doing so through a positive engagement with the human sciences—they will carry out theologizing that serves the Chinese Christian community and that also provides correctives for the global Christian community.”