

ASSEMBLIES OF GOD THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

Toward an Indigenous Pentecostal Theology of Worship

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by

Richard A. Pruitt

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Introduction

“Christianity is a vernacular faith.”¹ 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and further development of an ongoing study and will include some material gleaned and adapted from previous unpublished papers.² It will not be possible in this research project to answer all the questions posed when considering an indigenous approach to worship theology.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.

¹ 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.

² 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.”³ 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.⁴ 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.”⁵ For good biblical theology, “the primary goal of exegesis is not objectivity [*per se*] but to

³ 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.”

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

⁵ 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.”⁶ 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.”⁷ 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),⁸ 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.”⁹

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ All Scripture quotations will be from the NIV unless otherwise noted.

⁹ 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.¹⁰ 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.”¹¹

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) theologians¹² insist that a text may only have one meaning and that the meaning is explicitly restricted

¹⁰ 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.”

¹¹ Rosner, 5.

¹² 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 discrepancies¹³ by drawing a fine distinction between the words "meaning," "application," and "significance."¹⁴ 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.¹⁵ Each of these examples would be common to the first-century thinker but not necessarily obvious centuries later.

¹³ 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.

¹⁴ 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.

¹⁵ 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.¹⁶ 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,¹⁷ 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

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

¹⁶ 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).

¹⁷ 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.¹⁸ 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.”¹⁹

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

¹⁸ 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.

¹⁹ 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.²⁰ 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.²¹ 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,

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

²¹ 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.²²

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.²³ 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

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

²³ That is, decisions based upon the *agenda* of fourth century theologians.

sacred writings until then.”²⁴ 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 canon²⁵ but it did officially recognize the authority of the New Testament writings in a process that began in the first century.²⁶ The focus of New Testament theology on the canonical writings can be justified historically.²⁷ 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.²⁸ 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).

²⁴ Rosner, 3.

²⁵ 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.

²⁶ 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.”

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 24.

²⁸ 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.)

A Theological Approach Must Become Functional

The study of the Scriptures is best when it results in telling others the message learned. It is not enough to know the biblical stories. All stories in the Scripture are profitable for teaching. “All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness” (2 Tim 3:16). To show the unreliability—or out-right falsehood—of a text is an abuse of theological study and process. It belies the very function of theology. Whatever theological approach a person uses—be it Biblical, Systematic, Exegetical, Historical, etc.—it must fulfill the Divine function of theological study.

The Scriptures communicate God’s message to a dying world. The stories of the Bible not only enable the reader to learn about an ancient people’s experiences but to learn *from* them. “These things happened to them as examples and were written down as warnings for us, on whom the fulfillment of the ages has come” (2 Cor 10:11). Every story in the Scriptures serves both as a history lesson (what God did to or for them) and as a model (what God will do to or for us). The very commission of Christ—the Great Commission (Matt 28:18-20)—is one of “learn and teach.” One should never conduct a study of biblical truths in which the conclusion is to discredit what the text or topic intends. On the contrary, one must study the Bible to learn how to live and teach its truth to others.

As one understands the truth revealed in the text, that truth begins shaping one’s worldview and as the truth is discovered “it inflames the heart and constrains one to live a new life and to pass this new truth on to others.”²⁹ This is a functional theology. It is a

²⁹ Thomas R. Schreiner, *Interpreting the Pauline Epistle: Guides to New Testament Exegesis* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1990), 19.

process that takes what a text meant and communicates what it means today.

Walter Kaiser, in his work *Toward an Exegetical Theology*, believes the very crisis in hermeneutics (and theological study) today is the inability of the preacher and church teacher to “bridge the yawning chasm between understanding the content of Scripture as it was given in the past and proclaiming it with such relevance in the present as to produce faith, life, and bona fide works.”³⁰ James Smart draws a similar conclusion in his book *The Strange Silence of the Bible in the Church*.³¹ It is essential that the theological process “move from the original meaning to the contemporary meaning.”³²

Kaiser goes on to state, “The Achilles’ heel for many among the trained clergy is the failure to bring the biblical text from its B.C. or first first-century A.D. context and to relate it directly and legitimately to the present day.”³³ I heard Professor Kaiser speak in my early days of ministry (not long after he wrote the aforementioned book) and was very impressed with his passion on this subject. Although I differ with him in two key areas, I think he has “hit the nail right on the head” in this regard.³⁴ The function of the

³⁰ Kaiser, 18.

³¹ James D. Smart, *The Strange Silence of the Bible in the Church: A Study in Hermeneutics* (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster Publishers, 1970), 10.

³² Ibid., 34

³³ Kaiser, 131.

³⁴ Kaiser is dogmatic when it comes to insisting that “the author’s intended meaning is what a text means [*i.e.* its *only* meaning]” (Kaiser, p. 32-33). I believe there are some instances in which the writer (or the original audience) may not have fully comprehended the full extent of his utterance. (Daniel 10-12 is a good case in point, however there are numerous examples in the NT in which the writer *reinterprets* or broadens the original utterance.) Who is to say if the prophet/writer *fully* understood everything he was writing? Second, Kaiser is insistent that a proper theological development of a text requires that “[under] no [circumstance may] later teaching be used exegetically (or in any other way) to unpack the meaning or to enhance the usability of the individual text which is the object of...study” (Kaiser, p. 140). I think Kaiser goes too far in this insistence. He does assent to subsequent revelation being used in the “conclusions or summaries” of a lesson. However, I maintain that the biblical “author” is ultimately the Holy Spirit. His introduction and development of biblical concepts, though measured, is always consistent

theological process is to understand what a text means and then relate it to the present day. Jeffrey Camery-Hoggatt demonstrates a similar process in his work *Speaking of God*. He speaks of the necessity of taking a text from exegesis to exposition.³⁵

* * *

The purpose of a functional theological process is practical in nature. No process is necessary without application. Having presented a guided but flexible foundation to theological study, focus will now shift to establishing an indigenous Pentecostal theology of worship.

A Need for Indigenous Worship Theology

There are many methods and forms of worship within the body of Christ. Methods involving music, singing, dance, and other aspects of the arts are only *some* of the ways in which Christians express worship to God. Time will not permit a detailed analysis of each method. In this section (and the section on *Essentials*), my examples and thought will center primarily on music, singing, and accompanying expressions of Pentecostal worship.

It is the urge of many missionaries in a cross-cultural setting to teach worship from a subjective perspective. It seems only natural. We want this new body of believers to have songs to sing. Therefore, we teach them our songs. We want them to physically express worship to God. Therefore, we teach them our method of physical expression. However, worship becomes worship when it is a reflection of someone's heart. After all,

with the whole revelation on the given concept. It is not appropriate for us to teach an incomplete Scriptural concept.

³⁵ Jeffrey Camery-Hoggatt, *Speaking of God: Reading and Preaching the Word of God* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1995), 171.

it is *their* worship expressed to God, and not our worship of God through them, that matters.

I have long maintained that worship is either a witness of my heart (*i.e.*, reflective of my relationship with God) or it is a witness against my heart (*i.e.*, the message of the song testifies against me). People may learn songs or methods of worship. However, until these become contextualized they remain forms and not genuine expressions of worship. “Genuine contextualization is contextualization from *within*, not from without. It is the kind that begins with...the [present] culture, and constructs a message that will make sense from within the culture. [Unfortunately], the latest massive translation of what the gospel means is American.”³⁶

As the Gospel message is preached in a new society, it is imperative that a missionary challenges the new converts to develop songs and expressions of worship that, while not contradicting the nature of God or compromising the message of the Gospel, are genuinely native. “Missionaries will have to allow new converts to develop a form of Christian belief and worship style appropriate and effective in their own culture.”³⁷

The challenge of making Christian teaching indigenous without allowing it to become syncretistic is a continual struggle. Obviously, the indigenous process does pose serious difficulties. The missionary must safeguard the fundamental dogmas contained within Scripture and, at the same time, enable the local people to develop appropriate

³⁶ Melba Padilla Maggay, 38, 39.

³⁷ Byung-yoon Kim, “Issues in the Short-term Missionary Strategy,” in *Asian Church and God’s Mission*, ed. Wonsuk Ma and Julie C. Ma (West Caldwell, NJ: Mountain World Mission, 2003), 183.

methods of worshipping a holy God. Hwa Yung, in *Mangoes or Bananas? The Quest for an Authentic Asian Theology*, states:

The [most] basic consideration concerning contextualization, which A. F. Walls calls the ‘pilgrim’ principle, must always be held in tension with the ‘indigenizing’ principle. Both belong to the essence of the gospel. Together they point to the fact that God does not merely take us as we are and where we are, and leaves us there. He also seeks to transform us into what He wants us to be. Thus, along with the indigenizing principle, the Christian takes seriously the pilgrim principle, which whispers to him that he has no abiding city and warns him that to be faithful to Christ will put him out of step with his society; for that society never existed, in East or West, ancient time or modern, which could absorb the word of Christ painlessly into its system.³⁸

Contextualization is never an easy process. However, if we recognize that contextualization is a *process* then we can better assist the local people in developing an appropriate method of worship. The most promising safeguard throughout this difficult process is the ongoing teaching and training of the Scriptures.³⁹ Charles van Engen noted that one critical hermeneutical principle involves the “church reading the Scriptures in community.”⁴⁰ Through this process, the body of believers learns corporately what God expects and how they must behave as Christians. The people must have the Scriptures available in the local dialect and taught (or encouraged) to read them.⁴¹

³⁸ Hwa Yung, *Mangoes or Bananas? The Quest for an Authentic Asian Theology* (Irvine, CA: Regnum Books International, 1997), 63.

³⁹ G. C. Oosthuizen, *Theological Battleground in Asia and Africa*, (New York: Humanities Press, 1972), 11. “The church which is rooted in the Word of God is *eo ipso* indigenous, for genuine loyalty to the national community is conditioned by the Word of God itself. After all, true loyalty is already presupposed in the Ten Commandments. It is the gospel which through its inherent creative power molds the potential forms of the people. The Holy Spirit will lead an indigenous people to create an indigenous Church.

⁴⁰ Charles Van Engen, *Mission on the Way* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1996), 17.

⁴¹ “As Lamin Sanneh points out (1993), no other act of the missionary empowers people and dignifies their culture more than Bible translation. It takes people seriously and says to them that God speaks their language.” (*from* Paul G. Heibert and Eloise Hiebert Meneses, *Incarnational Ministry* [Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1995], 371.)

*Key Considerations in Developing an
Indigenous Worship Theology*

Teaching an indigenous Pentecostal worship theology must begin with the missionary's careful understanding of the Scriptures and an informed understanding of the culture of the worshippers. Paul Heibert defines culture as a people's mental map of their world.⁴² This map includes the physical world but is more a guide for how they determine their actions.

Without a good understanding of a people's point-of-view (worldview), any effort to teach proper worship theology and practice will be extremely difficult. Not only will the people fail to grasp a biblically appropriate manner of worship but the missionary may likely interpret some worship activities as syncretistic or idolatrous in nature when, in fact, that might not *necessarily* be the case.⁴³ "Misunderstandings are based on ignorance of the beliefs, feelings, and values of another culture. The solution is to learn how the other culture works. Our first task in entering a new culture is to be a student of its ways. Whenever a culture 'makes no sense' to us, we must assume that the problem is ours, because the people's behavior makes sense to them."⁴⁴

The fact of Christ's incarnation into a society and moment in time demonstrates the desire of God to be known and experienced within a local culture. "When God became man, Christ took flesh in a particular family, as a member of a particular nation,

⁴² Paul G. Heibert, "Cultural Differences and the Communication of the Gospel," in *Perspectives on the World Christian Movement*, Third edition, ed. Ralph D. Winter and Steven C. Hawthorne (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 1999), 375.

⁴³ For example, in America we celebrate Christmas with decorated trees, stockings by the fireplace, and yard ornamentation. We celebrate Easter with Easter egg hunts. Many of the rituals utilized to celebrate otherwise *holy* occasions may be pagan in origin but are *American* in culture.

⁴⁴ Heibert, 378.

with the tradition of customs associated with that nation. All that was not evil He sanctified.”⁴⁵ Consequently, when introducing Christ to someone or to a people He enters their culture and sanctifies all that is capable of sanctification by His presence.

As I noted at the beginning of this paper, a proper understanding of this subject is an ongoing process that I have by no means mastered. However, I believe there may be several key considerations that should be contemplated in developing any theology of worship. As worship teachers, my wife and I have had several opportunities to teach worship practices and theology overseas. Most of our experience has been in Guam and the Philippines. In this very cosmopolitan Asian setting, we have observed several principles that have proved helpful and require further contemplation. In fact, because of the mix of Asian cultures in the Philippines, Melba Padilla Maggay states, “It appears that the Philippines is a good case study on the failure and success of Christianity in Asia.”⁴⁶

These concepts include (but are not limited to): (1) Understanding how the people celebrate; (2) Understanding how the people mourn; (3) Considering the folk understanding of the nature of deity, the afterlife, sin, judgment, blessing, and relationship; (4) Encouraging the writing of worship songs in the native tongue; and (5) Conceptually teaching the principle that “new victories require new songs.” Each concept will be briefly surveyed as more deliberate study is in order.

⁴⁵ Hwa Yung, 62.

⁴⁶ Melba Padilla Maggay, 37.

Understanding How People Celebrate

Cultural understandings regarding celebration will deeply affect the manner and method in which a people worship God. Within many Asian cultures (particularly the Island nations and southern Asia) the festival or feast occasions occupy a prominent place in society and occur frequently. It would be unusual (not to mention rude) to be invited to a festive occasion and not attend. Celebration is an integral part of society because it builds relationship, fosters inclusion, and provides an opportunity to experience another person's joy.

This aspect of culture continues to remain prominent once the church has formed. Julie Ma notes the importance of bringing this cultural element into the church body when she states, "Gathering together in the name of Christ [to celebrate] is perhaps one of their favorite spiritual activities."⁴⁷ The missionary should spend considerable time understanding the various festivals and occasions of celebration to develop an indigenous worship theology.

Understanding How People Mourn

Funeral proceedings and other occasions in which people gather to mourn are an important consideration for worship development. Much of worship practice involves humility, mourning, and contrition. The ancestor veneration found in all Asian cultures may involve prayer for the dead (to enter the afterlife) or praying to the departed ancestors. The funeral proceedings often lasts for one week. These practices would not be conducive within the Christian faith but the occasion should not necessarily be

⁴⁷ Julie C. Ma, "A Close Encounter with the Transcendental," in *Asian Church and God's Mission*, ed. Wonsuk Ma and Julie C. Ma (West Caldwell, NJ: Mountain World Mission, 2003), 127.

prohibited. Once a church is formed the process takes on new meaning. Believers are taught to honor the person's life, show respect for the family, and reflect on the transition of the deceased to the afterlife. It is not usually necessary to discontinue the event; only to provide new meaning for the gathering.⁴⁸

Consider Folk Understanding

It is important to realize that all theological understandings are human interpretations of biblical revelations within particular contexts.⁴⁹ For certain, native conceptual understandings of the nature of deity, an understanding of the afterlife, sin, judgment, blessing, and relationships (to name a few) are not always conducive to biblical teaching. However, this is true of any culture in which the light of the Gospel breaks through (or even in cultures that have already embraced the Gospel!). What is important is to begin with what people currently understand and build towards (sometimes "line upon line") an understanding true to the Scriptures.

Western understandings of primary biblical concepts are not the "bottom line" in every theological instance. "Universal moral principles may seem clear enough on the surface, but the actual realization of them is determined partly by each culture's distinctions."⁵⁰ Western understanding is *Western* understanding. An Asian's understanding of the same concept may be different and at the same time true to biblical teaching, albeit from another perspective.

⁴⁸ Wonsuk Ma, "Three Types of Ancestor Veneration," in *Asian Church and God's Mission*, ed. Wonsuk Ma and Julie C. Ma (West Caldwell, NJ: Mountain World Mission, 2003), 163f.

⁴⁹ Hwa Yung, 64.

⁵⁰ Dey, 470. "It seems that while the essence of each commandment is clear, the edges are defined differently by different cultures" (471).

For example, the Western concept of sin involves an understanding of corruption, wickedness, and guilt. Westerners preach against sinful acts because they are “bad.” However, a Filipino mindset does not view sin in this regard. In fact, in much of Asia, sin is understood from a perspective of relationship.⁵¹ Sin is a state of disharmony (this is true whether speaking of a relationship between elders, ancestors, or with the gods). If a person commits sin (a mistake), God is disappointed. The fact that God is disappointed brings shame to the individual because the relationship is broken or wounded.⁵²

Many other theological concepts could be considered as well. Suffice it to say many Asian cultural practices are true to biblical teaching but vastly different from Western thought. Relationships are deeply affected by ancestor veneration. Many traditions are rooted in community rather than individuality. The afterlife and spirit world is much more real. Asians do not separate the body and the spirit as is typical in Western thought. Consequently, encounters with the supernatural are more prevalent and are generally required for true conversion to occur. Natural disasters are seen as judgments rather than random natural events. Blessing from a deity is something to be greatly desired rather than “just another choice,” as in Western ideology. In every event, these concepts must be understood in order to develop meaningful anthems and actions of worship.

Encourage Native Song Writing

It is crucial that people be able to express worship to God in their native tongue.

⁵¹ Melba Padilla Maggay, 35.

⁵² This understanding of sin seems apparent in Joseph’s mind when he refuses relations with Potiphar’s wife. He refuses her advances because he considers his relationship with Potiphar and with God. He realizes that both relationships will be broken if he *sins* (Gen 39:8-9).

“The mother tongue is the language people learn first at their mother’s knee; in which they learn to think and talk about the world around them, to interact with people closest to them, to acquire and express their values, the language which becomes part of their personality and identity, and which expresses ethnicity and solidarity with their people.”⁵³ Many great worship songs have enjoyed worldwide appeal. To date, all were written in English.⁵⁴ I know of no transcontinental worship songs written or preserved in any other language. English may very well be the “new Greek” of modern society. It crosses many borders and unites many people. However, most people in the world do not speak English, and of those who do, it is not their primary language.

There is nothing wrong with any English language song being sung cross-culturally if the people want to sing in English. However, it must never be assumed that the meaning or the depth of expression is the same. I am not suggesting that they are not meaningful or heart-felt in some way. Rather, I am suggesting that it would be more meaningful and more heart-felt if the same or similar concept were penned in the vernacular. Paul Heibert said, “We must recognize that forms of worship vary from culture to culture. We like to sing hymns and choruses. Others like monotonic chants and dancing. Each of us identifies most with songs in our own languages and music styles. One sign of a healthy church is that it writes songs and creates its own worship

⁵³ Barbara F. Grimes, “From Every Language,” in *Perspectives on the World Christian Movement*, Third edition, ed. Ralph D. Winter and Steven C. Hawthorne (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 1999), 559.

⁵⁴ Of course, there are many great traditional hymns including “A Mighty Fortress is our God,” by Martin Luther (1529) and “Silent Night,” (1818) that were written in German; “Be Thou My Vision,” (eighth century Irish Hymn); “All Creatures of our God and King,” written by St. Francis of Assisi (1225); and “O Come All Ye Faithful,” written in Latin (1751). However, these great hymns (and others) enjoy longevity and cross-cultural appeal because they were translated into English and adopted into Western culture.

