

# **A Filipino Perspective of Preventive Grace in Relation to Biblical Studies**

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After coming home from the United States, having been invited to present a paper in a group of academicians, the president of a seminary in the Baguio City, told a group of students about the applause given him. In his presentation, he told the scholars something like this: “In the West your slogan is ‘Publish or Perish.’ In the Philippines, it is “Plant Church or Perish.” This implies that what one learns, regardless of the academic disciplines and degrees attained, must contribute to the church growth. Theological education in the Philippines, and in Asia-Pacific, is not detached from the discipling ministry of the church, be it local or national. The search continues for men and women who strive and struggle for existential thrust of the Bible and theology.

## **A Shaping of My Understanding of Ministry.**

There may have been so many questions that I asked my father, who was a pastor, about the Bible. But the question I could not forget was based on the Book of James. It was in a nipa hut parsonage while I was in third year in high school that I asked, “Dad, what does it mean when the Bible says, ‘the tongue is also a fire?’” (James 3:6). “Someday, you will know,” was his answer. That did not answer my question. But such incident was the beginning of my quest of understanding. My reading of the Bible was not to know “what it says,” but to raise the question of “why it says what it says.” Being actively involved in a Southern Baptist church at the last year of my high school helped me to answer some of my questions.

Attending the Visayan Nazarene Bible College motivated me further to pursue the quest. And if God would call me to the ministry, I prayed it would be on teaching! It was clear at the last year of my college that my call was toward that. But when it came to me I understood it as call to be part teaching staff of Visayan Nazarene Bible College. Convinced and moved by this, my years at

APNTS, as a student, were more purposeful, and most of my subjects created in me a feeling of, what Dr. Lebron Fairbanks called, “holy restlessness.” Biblical courses were interesting to me, but not at the expense of the many other subjects I took.

While finishing my seminary studies, I was told that there seemed to be a reservation of VNBC taking me as part of the faculty because I had no pastoral experience. A call of a church came which I accepted. After serving for seven months as a pastor, I pursued another Masters in Seoul, South Korea. As a student in that country, I also pastored a good group of foreign workers, from many countries in Asia, always with an aim that I will get into teaching ministry. Despite my narrow view of ministry, I was aware more and more of the wisdom behind the “qualifications” of being a teacher in a theological institution. This means that to be part of the teaching ministry, I need to have pastoral experience. Such prerequisite seemed to be necessary in this geographical context of ministry.

As a teacher in the Bible College, different subjects were given me to teach: from Biblical studies, to Church history, and Logic. I thought I studied to specialize on a particular discipline but ended up being a “master of none.” However, the “chapsuey” training I had informed me that indeed there are significant and “promising” connections with the courses taught. For instance, the trends and issues in and of Biblical studies are enlightened and illuminated by the history Church. A parallel line exists is clear. Philosophy and Logic also informs a student of the Bible in terms of the mode of interpretation employed in the approach to the passage. This means that every interpretation of a biblical text always utilizes a mode of thinking.

### **A Generalist Approach to Theological Education**

What was shown so far is the fact that a generalist is as “authoritative” as a specialist in the light of Christian ministry especially here in the Philippines. It seems inappropriate for a minister in Asia and the Pacific to excuse himself

or herself because his or her specialization is biblical studies and not theology, evangelism and not Christian education, theology and not discipleship.

A friend just completed his doctorate. One time he went to a rural area. As the invited guest speaker, he was introduced as a doctor. After the service, a mother came to him with a sick daughter, asking if he can check her and prescribed medicines for her child. My friend was about to laugh. With courtesy he refused to do so because his was a doctorate in theology, and not medicine. Instead, he gave some practical advice and ended that “medical session” with a prayer.

This is to say that ministers, pastors and teachers in Asia and the Pacific have the mandate and the pressure to “gird their loins” in every way possible and be accessible to their constituents. More and more they are expected to have a consolidated knowledge of interdisciplinary disciplines. Despite the growing phenomenon of ‘departmentalization,” compartmentalization and specialization, as the present fad and the trend in Christian ministry in this world area, there remains a need for ministers who can integrate the different disciplines into various ministry roles.

### **The Place of Biblical Studies in Multidisciplinary Contexts**

With this in mind, what place does biblical studies have in this cultural and ministerial milieu? Should biblical studies be subsumed only with other disciplines as providing the “biblical foundation?” Should the need of studying the Scriptures be relegated to the margin so that even seminary curriculum requires only minimum biblical courses to the student assuming that he or she knows the Scripture and disciplines related to it?

To answer those questions is to approach then from a different mode. For many years, the Bible and Culture had been treated as separate entities. For the most part, they are placed in tension against each other. A proposal, it has been said, is to contextualize.

Contextualization of the messages and truth in the Scripture has been and is still the practice to this day. But this term has always been used especially when communicating biblical truths to non-Western world. Cultures like that of Latin America, Africa, and Asia demand that contextualization is indeed indispensable.<sup>4</sup> More so, every attempt to state and articulate biblical truths by people from these regions of the world is labeled as “contextualized theology.” But church history is apparent in showing that contextualization was there all along. Surely the West has been doing this, and works of contextualization had been done from the start, as the church searched for logical and coherent understanding and expression of the tradition she received.<sup>5</sup> Their rational approach and methodology to the interpretation of the Bible was their cultural milieu. Today, most often their scholarly works are accepted as objective, while works in the world areas mentioned are considered subjective. The system that developed in the West is considered “theology from above,” which means the dominance of reason; the non-western is “theology from below,” the subjectivity of experience.

### **Prevenient Grace as a “leveling” canon**

The Wesleyan quadrilateral, on its perspective on prevenient grace, places these two polarities on the same level of importance, which means either approaches is valid. By saying this I assume that ministers and/or theologian in the contexts mentioned have the personal experience of God’s saving grace. Their quest for relevance, clarity, understanding, and meaning is indeed a journey in grace. Methodologies and systems drawn out from the Bible are by

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<sup>4</sup>See, Anthony C. Thiselton, *New Horizons in Hermeneutics* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1992), 379.

<sup>5</sup>Bernard Ramm, *Protestant Biblical Interpretation*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1970), 23-92.

no means subsidiary, peripheral or secondary and destructive. One thing stands out in perceiving their minds and heart, that there is indeed a tensive fusion of grace from above and grace from below. Yes, grace is in all as much as it is free for all.

It is improbable, notwithstanding, impossible, to “shred” the Wesleyan quadrilateral into parts. To posit that the Bible is primary in all four, whether or not one is aware it holds true that tradition, reason and experience, always affects methodology and interpretation. John Wesley demonstrated this.

### **John Wesley as a Contextualizer: Christian Perfection as a Test Case.**

It is apparent that John Wesley looked at the Scripture from his cultural, social, and religious context. To show this, in the opening pages of his *Plain Account of Christian Perfection*, he indicated that Bishop Taylor, Thomas a Kempis, and Bishop Law gave him the lenses through which the Bible has to be read. Then he writes, in the year 1729,

“I began not only to read, but to study, the Bible as the one, the only standard of truth, and the only model of pure religion. Hence I saw, in a clear and dear light, the indispensable necessity of having the “mind which was in Christ,” and of “walking as Christ also walked:”...And this was the light, wherein at this time I generally considered religion, as a uniform following of Christ.”<sup>6</sup>

In reading Taylor, Wesley was, to use his own word, “affected,” with that which related to purity of intention. Thus, he was convinced of the necessity of complete and total consecration of life to God. In Kempis’ works, Wesley received the light that all of his heart has to be given to God. Law convinced him further that there could be no half a Christian. In short, Wesley’s teaching

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<sup>6</sup>John Wesley, *A Plain Account of Christian Perfection*, (London: Wesleyan Conference, 1872; reprint, Kansas City, MO: Beacon Hill Press of Kansas City, 1966), 9-11 (page citation are to the reprint edition).

on Christian perfection could not simply be categorized as purely scriptural, for there was the interplay of the tradition and reason.

Wesley was a genius, though considered as a folk theologian. Indeed, his was a “praxis theology,” or what I call, “Scripture, tradition, and reason in experience. Scripture has to be connected with experience. It is even appropriate to say, “experience validates Scripture, tradition and reason.” However, this is not to say that experience supersedes Scripture. Yet I maintain that the former provides “validity” to the other three. Wesley held a teaching or theology that had a “laboratory.” Beyond the authorities that influenced him, Wesley allowed his theology to be “tested” in small groups, particularly the bands. His was not purely biblical, philosophic and rational: it was not only a “top-to-bottom” theology but very well as a “bottom-to-top” theology as well. The practical disciplines and virtues of his day were brought in contact with the disciplines that his teaching demands. Thus, his teachings on Christian perfection were always coupled with the pursuit and disciplines of the bands; hence, there was a “fusion of horizon,” to use Gadamer’s phrase.<sup>7</sup>

It appears that the decline and confusion that surrounds the Wesleyan teaching on Christian perfection, then, lies on the detachment of the doctrine from the disciplines such as that of the bands. Now, the ongoing call has always been the cry of the church; that is, articulation, clarity and relevance of the doctrine. But void of a “laboratory,” the struggle will always remain academic. Wesley demonstrated the necessity for a student of the Bible to be aware of his or her social, cultural, and religious environment in articulating biblical truths and messages, and to connect this with experience. Such was his methodology. Such was his design.

What does this example provide for the present task of biblical studies? What relationship should exist between biblical truths and concepts with that of culture, particularly that of the Asia and the Pacific?

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<sup>7</sup>In Thiselton, *New Horizons*, 333.

## **Bible and Culture: A Proposal**

In answer to this question I would like to propose models that would help us in articulating biblical truths. My premise is that, there is an analogical relationship that exists between biblical truths and culture.<sup>8</sup>

The first model is that of correspondence relationship. This model emphasizes that unearthed biblical truths identifies with culture. Its focus is on the agreement between the two and this is healthy and positive. To illustrate: biblical truth agrees or identifies with culture.

This means that when biblical truth and culture are seen in this relationship, there is the appreciation, affirmation, and acceptance of culture. Culture then ‘sees’ biblical truth as giving value to an established norm or teachings that people already embraced. In this model, truths then are considered as “culture-friendly.”

This view is significant especially in the context of prevenient grace. Many years ago, passing by a Bible college classroom, I was stunned by an observation of the Filipino culture by a missionary. He said, and I quote, “There are so many things in your culture that are not biblical.” I understand such statement can be looked from different angles, but regardless, it is unlikely for someone to stress that, to imply that some cultures are more biblical, hence provincial. In the past, the Christness in culture was relegated to the issue of pluralism, and evangelicals were scared of syncretism. But as Wesleyan evangelical, I suggest that we will allow the Bible and bible truths to affirm our culture, for there is in culture the “sketches of Christ,” to quote Dr. Porter.<sup>9</sup> Should those agreements be object of suspicion? I don’t believe so. For those

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<sup>8</sup>For his guidance in developing these models, I am grateful to Dr. Tereso Casino.

<sup>9</sup>Commencement address given at APNTS on April 5, 2003.

agreements are better seen as redemption-on the-process. Dr. Floyd Cunningham strikes it loud when he observed that prevenient grace is not just preventing grace, but it is also pursuing or persuading grace.<sup>10</sup>

Secondly, another model is that of **synthetic relationship**. This means that part of a biblical truth for example, is part of culture. There is a “shared” or interrelated relationship, emphasizing partly shared characteristic. To illustrate, it has been said that Asians give value more to relationships than the Westerners. This is not true in many ways. But peoples of Asia and the Pacific have a dyadic view of relationship, which means to say that they are not individualistic; rather the emphasis is on social and communal relationship. The loving of neighbor can aptly be said to be working in many ways beyond “systems” and formalities. But loving the neighbor can also be carried to the unethical extreme.

One Sunday morning, a news was told. A boy, with two other friends, held up a taxi driver. This boy informed the driver the reason for the hold up. His mother was in the hospital and was in need of medicines. Then before getting out of the taxi, he told the taxi driver where to find him. The driver reported the happening to the owner of the taxi. The latter was not convinced and so he accompanied the driver. They went to the hospital where the boy and his mother were, and there they found him. They boy apologized as he was crying and told the driver and the owner that he would work for the money he robbed.

Many similar stories such as this, that has ethical, hence, spiritual matters that came out from the students in my class last summer. For this model, I would like to retain the principle of prevenient grace. The act of the boy can

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<sup>10</sup>See his article, “Christ, The Word, The Light, The Message: A Wesleyan Reflection on the World Mission” *Asia Journal of Theology* 5 (April 1991): 104-118. In another, he writes of God as the great Persuader, *The Mediator* 4, no. 1 (October 2002): 2.



totally be dismissed as sin or sinful, but one who sees his heart can definitely affirm grace.

The third model is the **contrastive relationship**. This indicates that biblical truths differs from that of culture, although the identity of each concept is distinctively established. For example, holiness in the Bible is ethical; whereas in some culture it is social, based on taboos. This shows that the identity of the first can stand on its own even without the presence of the second. Yet, the first is defined in relationship to the second with the stress on the difference. Furthermore, this model assumes the Bible to be pre-eminent and not compromised to culture. As such it shows the greater tension. Yet even with the seeming polarity, a student of Bible should study carefully and critically the differences in order to address those redemptively.

### **What Do these Models Imply to me as a Filipino, as an Asian?**

First and foremost, in the eyes of grace, they imply that I have been given a freedom in grace to reread the Bible, and interpret God's word, without fear of intimidation and criticism. What one should fear is his or her haphazard and non-critical approach to the Word of God. What one should fear is careful interpretation of God's word with a careless understanding of one's culture. What one should fear is non-critical absorption of established truth-system drawn by many from God's word with an antipathetic and cynical heart on one's culture.

Even with our continued struggle for articulation due to the language gap we have with the resources we read, we people in Asia and the Pacific, are in grace to bridge meaning with the Bible and our culture.

Second, these models provide freedom and flexibility for a Filipino, or an Asian like me. Dr. Ackerman is partly right when he declared that what we

need today is not new methodology but rather relevance.<sup>11</sup> To accept these models does not, at all, defy the “canonized” and accepted law and principles of interpretation. It means that the student of the Bible, after “arriving” at a truth, must bring in these models, in order to allow an interaction with the culture.

It has been said, absolute freedom is anarchy. But our freedom is not to be delivered from the biblical-theological systems, or tradition handed down to us, but it is one which is free to dialogue and to interact within the chosen tradition. It is freedom to modify, to restate, to articulate biblical truths being systematized in such a way that address especially the existential dimension of a people in particular culture.

Third, these models can be used as guide in biblical interpretation. This means that one who approaches the Bible is emancipated to bring himself or herself to the text. It is not inappropriate to say that Koreans should be free to understand and interpret the Bible as Koreans. The same should be to the people of Myanmar, Thailand, Indonesia, India, China, Samoa, Papua New Guinea, and the Philippines, to mention a few. The continued emergence of biblical commentaries, the revision of many existing ones, and even with the surge of scientific disciplines used to interpret the Scriptures, all prove the dynamic nature of the Word of God. Christians in Asia and the Pacific ought not to relinquish the task of biblical interpretation to the Westerners. Once, I heard, that Asians cannot be at par with the North Americans and the Europeans when it comes to biblical studies. But this is not about competition. It is not about who is more knowledgeable? who is more informed? who has the most academic, literary resources? It is about being true to the mandate of Christ, and being true to the “cry of culture.” It is about “legitimizing” that grace that is very much at work to the “pursuers” of the biblical truths.

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<sup>11</sup>David Ackerman, “Proclaiming Biblical Holiness For the Twenty-First Century: The Central Task of Wesleyan Biblical Studies,” *The Mediator* 2, no. 1 (2000): 2.

Our struggle on language is legitimate. Our contention with our “cultural instincts” and “psychological depth” are real. However, these realities mandate us to be true to ourselves, and to be who we are. Our framework is different; our mental make up and social backgrounds are just different.

But what do these models show? I saw in this model the incarnated word of God. Jesus, God’s son, is the ultimate model behind these models. In him meet the divine and the human, the “top” and the “bottom.” We believe that He was not God first and foremost, then second as a human, but that he is God-man. In him intersects the divine and the human. It can also be said of him that he is man-God, just as he is traditionally called God-man. He did not only “theologize” God to human beings, but he also articulated humankind to God. He was human and took every humanness in him. His “living among us” brought culture into a “dialogue” with the divine. And finally, when challenged to polarize the divine and the demonic, he took upon himself our sin. This he did to redeem. And this he did to provide a model for the divine (the Bible) and the human (culture), to coalesce so that Christocentric redemption occurs.. After all, Christ is “in” all.

A student of the word need never fear for the word of God and truths drawn out to be “contaminated” by the inadequacies, and even the pollution of culture. Jesus Christ showed that even when the opposites of the divine and the demonic meet, the divine always prevail, and in many occasions, redemption takes place. There is always the triumph of God’s purpose as he says in Isaiah:

As the rain and the snow come down from heaven from  
 heaven and do not return to it without watering the earth, and  
 making it bud and flourish so that it yields seed for the sower and bread for the  
 eater, so is my word that goes out from my  
 mouth: It  
 will not  
 return to  
 e m p t y

but will  
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 sh which  
 I desire  
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 11).

I am aware of the postmodernity that affected me. But I am also aware of the sin in history that led practically ‘dehumanization’ of many, including the brothers and sisters in the faith, all because of the attitude of non-acceptance, and all because grace was never given a “chance:” I opt to give grace a chance.

We, Wesleyans, have chosen our methodology;  
 We have chosen our system  
 We have chosen a definite connection with the past.  
 We have chosen our tradition.  
 We have chosen our message.  
 We have chosen our destiny.  
 And with others,  
 We have chosen our “Man in history” – Jesus.  
 And because of him,  
 We chose to respect culture  
 We chose to speak and let others speak  
 We chose to listen because we have been heard  
 We chose to allow freedom to have its course

because his freedom took us himself.

We chose these, and many more, because of GRACE.

He who said, "Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away," IS the word who will never, never pass away.