

## DOING THEOLOGY IN A MULTICULTURAL THEOLOGICAL COMMUNITY

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In today's world of globalization, a Christian community, as a witnessing community, is increasingly being confronted with the multicultural reality of its ministry context. As an objective reality, many regions in our global world, including the United States and South Korea, are becoming more diverse as demographic shifts accentuate the presence of those who come from different cultural and ethnic backgrounds in our communities, cities and nations. As a subjective reality, many societies are gradually becoming more multicultural as cultural pluralism and diversity inform their consciousness, both individually and collectively.

Recently, a growing number of evangelical congregations in the United States have been, in response, seeking to grow as multicultural Christian communities. Many of these congregations, situated in diverse urban and suburban communities, aim to be effective in reaching out to diverse populations. Most of the emerging literatures that are informed by these congregational experiences, however, have thus far focused on practical ministry issues such as worship styles, inter-cultural communications skills and congregational leadership structures. What is conspicuously absent in this growing discourse about multicultural ministries is a focused conversation about how to do Biblical and theological reflections together as people of God from different backgrounds. The absence of this focus in the current literature is particularly puzzling since these growing multicultural congregations are primarily Protestant and evangelical in their theological orientations, identifying themselves as the "people of the Book."

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These recent and other related developments point to an important task today's seminaries and congregations face, namely the task of training future pastors and theologians who can engage God's Word competently in today's complex, multicultural world. In what ways do today's evangelical seminaries and congregations re-conceptualize the way they do their Biblical and theological reflections, recognizing both new opportunities and challenges today's changing realities bring. This article aims to make some modest proposals to generate and facilitate much needed conversations in this area of theological reflections.

#### THE SOCIAL LOCATION OF THE READER DOES MATTER

In today's postmodern era, the task of hermeneutics has become particularly significant and contested, as a growing number of people – both in and outside of the church—embrace the notion that the way individuals interpret a text is largely dependent on which community of culture to which they belong. During the past three decades, the postmodern hermeneutics of radical reader-response criticism has indeed privileged the social location<sup>1</sup> of readers as a primary factor that determines the meaning of the text. From this perspective, any interpretation of a text is more about the social location of the reader or of the interpretive community than about the text itself.

In response, many evangelical theologians challenged this new method of hermeneutics while continuing to defend the practice of author-oriented interpretation. However, the caution against the reader-response approach should not cause evangelical Christians to overlook or neglect an important emphasis that postmodern scholarship raises: when it comes to hermeneutics, the social location of the reader matters. One's particular social location may not determine the meaning of the text as postmodernists might insist; however, it does influence how an individual engages it, including God's Word.

According to sociologist Ann Swidler, culture strongly shapes how people interpret their experiences and evaluate reality around them by providing a repertoire or "tool kit" of ideas, habits, skills, and styles.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>By social location I am referring to those social, cultural and historical experiences that influence and shape our identities.

<sup>2</sup>Ann Swidler, "Culture in Action: Symbols and Strategies," *American Sociological Review*, 51 (1986): 273-86.

These culturally shaped “tool kits,” in turn, influence how an individual interprets one’s text, including the Bible. Using Swidler’s conceptual framework, sociologists Emerson and Smith, in their recent sociological study of white evangelical Christians in the United States, found that the group’s particular social location has strongly shaped their Christian faith and worldview.<sup>3</sup> In particular, they noted that white evangelical Christians interpret their Bible as well as their world through the grids of “accountable freewill individualism,”<sup>4</sup> “antistructuralism,”<sup>5</sup> and “relationalism.”<sup>6</sup> Given these cultural toolkits, Emerson and Smith concluded, white evangelical Christians tend to interpret the meaning of sin, the Gospel, and salvation in narrow, individualistic ways while conservative black Christians do not.

The fact that one’s social location and culture influence one’s interpretation of the Bible has been observed not just by sociologists. John Stott, a leading British Christian leader, noted that the evangelical Christian community in North America tends to ignore major teachings in the Bible that focus on the poor, partly due to its particular social location (i.e., its primarily white, politically-conservative, middle-class background).<sup>7</sup> While the evangelical Christian community believes that the entire Bible is the very Word of God, its pastors and theologians, John Stott argued, are often selective about what themes or portions of the Bible from which they preach and teach. Furthermore, their own interpretation of the given text is strongly shaped by their own lived experiences and culturally-constructed perspectives. In short, as John Calvin noted many centuries ago, people of God read the Scriptures through their own “spectacles.”

For Christians who deeply desire to grow in Biblical wisdom, this poses a significant challenge. For when pastors and theologians focus

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<sup>3</sup>Michael Emerson and Christian Smith, *Divided by Faith: Evangelical Religion and the Problem of Race in America* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2000).

<sup>4</sup>Emerson and Smith use this label to refer to a strongly-held belief that individuals “exist independent of structures and institutions, have freewill, and are individually accountable for their own actions,” a view that is commonly found among white evangelical Christians. *Ibid.*, 76-77.

<sup>5</sup>“Inability to perceive or unwillingness to accept social structural influences.” *Ibid.*, 76.

<sup>6</sup>Tendency to attach “central importance to interpersonal relationships.” *Ibid.*

<sup>7</sup>John R. W. Stott, *Human Rights & Human Wrongs: Major Issues for a New Century* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1999), 21-16.

only on those themes that are relevant or meaningful to their particular, homogeneous communities, they can unwittingly hinder their people from seeing and responding to the whole counsel of God. Furthermore, such a way of engaging God's Word might create certain hermeneutical blind-spots that might effectively cover their individual as well as communal sins.<sup>8</sup>

Therefore, if the church is to be engaged in a Biblical ministry that is both pastoral and prophetic, her leaders and members need to first acknowledge that social location does influence how one reads and understands God's word. Such an acknowledgement would enable one to approach the study of God's Word with a level of epistemological humility that confesses the need for the work of God's Spirit. Furthermore, such an awareness of one's own culturally-shaped blind spots would motivate one to seek out the perspectives of "others" that come from different social locations, to see the task of doing Biblical and theological reflections as a communal and collaborative work of God's people.

#### PRACTICING "PENTACOSTAL PLURALITY"

One of the reasons why many evangelical theologians seem to distance themselves from the issue of social location is because postmodern scholarship often uses this concept to legitimize radical forms of relativism. A given interpretive community, it is argued, can and should construct its own interpretation of a text, an interpretation that is authentic to the lived experience and perspective of the community that is situated in a particular social location. Such a hermeneutical approach not only elevates the "particular" to dominate, if not eclipse, the "universal" but also dissolves any meaningful possibility of accountability of a local interpretation (i.e., no one from outside of the community can and should critique the validity of the interpretation). Such a method of hermeneutical practice is problematic for Christians who embrace the notion of the absolute and objective Truth. However, taking social location seriously does not have to lead us to the pathway of relativism.

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<sup>8</sup> Once again, Emerson and Smith's study illustrates this hermeneutical phenomenon in a compelling way.

In his recent work, Kevin Vanhoozer raises a significant question on behalf of multicultural Christian communities when he asks, “How then can we affirm the priesthood of all believers without falling prey to interpretive relativism.”<sup>9</sup> Vanhoozer, then, proposes the following approach to engage the Scriptural text. He writes,

There is a single meaning in the text, but it is too rich that we may need the insights of a variety of individual and cultural perspectives fully to do it justice. . . . The single correct meaning may only come to light through multicultural interpretation.<sup>10</sup>

Convinced that the fullest meaning of the text can be best attained through the collaborative interpretive work done by Christians from various different backgrounds, Vanhoozer thus introduces the concept of “Pentecostal plurality,” a hermeneutical model that “maintains that the one true interpretation is best approximated by a diversity of particular methods and contexts of reading.”<sup>11</sup>

In today’s postmodern world, a kind of “monistic” interpretive approach that ignores the significance of social location and quickly universalizes a particular interpretation of the text, a practice that has often characterized evangelical scholarship in the past, can no longer sustain its legitimacy. Instead, as Vanhoozer proposed, evangelical Christians should strive for “Pentecostal plurality,” strive for attaining “critical and multifaceted unity” as one of our hermeneutical goals. Such a practice would enable God’s people to overcome the challenge of hermeneutical blind-spots and biases, thus allowing them to interpret His Word with greater accuracy and fullness.

In today’s fractured multicultural world, there is another significant reason why the Church of Jesus Christ needs to pursue and practice “Pentecostal plurality.” On the night before his arrest, Jesus our Savior offered a passionate prayer for all his followers, for the church (John 17:20-26). Among the many things for which he could have prayed, Jesus chose to focus on one main theme—unity among his followers—when he prayed:

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<sup>9</sup>Kevin Vanhoozer, “‘But That’s Your Interpretation’: Realism, Reading, and Reformation,” *Modern Reformation* (July/August 1999): 27.

<sup>10</sup>Ibid.

<sup>11</sup>Kevin Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning in This Text*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1998), 419.

I pray also for those who will believe in me through their (the apostles') message, that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you . . . so that the world may believe that you have sent me (John 17: 20-21; TNIV).

It is important to note that Jesus prayed for unity among all His followers so that the world will know who He is, that He is the Messiah sent from God. If there were ever a time when the church needs to be especially attentive to this particular prayer offered by Jesus, that time is now. In today's multicultural world, the ideal of "unity-in-diversity" is increasingly identified as a desirable and yet ever elusive goal. Confronted with the challenge of increasing diversity, various groups are experimenting with different approaches to "manage diversity." On the conservative side, a commonly adopted approach is to promote a model of assimilation, mandating minority groups to adopt the culture of the majority group, thus creating uniformity but not a "unity-in-diversity." On the progressive side, a favored approach is to encourage each group to develop its own identity and culture, thus creating pluralistic diversity but not, once again, a "unity-in-diversity."

Neither approach, therefore, is satisfying to those who seek to develop and experience the potential richness of "unity-in-diversity." Yet, these secular organizations are not able to experience what they desire simply because they do not have a compelling, shared core identity that, at the same time, enables different members to maintain their distinctiveness. In a time such as this, can the community of God's people demonstrate and live out this reality of true "unity-in-diversity." Particularly, for seminaries and local churches, can we concretely explore ways to practice "Pentecostal plurality" in the way we approach Biblical and theological reflections? Can we powerfully proclaim that Jesus is the Savior for all people groups by demonstrating that the Christianity is not a Western religion as commonly assumed by the non-believing postmodern world? While the benefits of the hermeneutical practice of "Pentecostal plurality" are evidently significant, it is also equally clear that the task of practicing and modeling it in today's seminaries and congregations faces many challenges. As a growing number of seminaries and congregations become more diverse ethnically and racially, these communities of faith have unprecedented opportunities to engage God's word in a creative, multicultural way. However, these opportunities are too often neglected and missed because these institutions continue to use the traditional mode of doing theology, because they continue to view the

practice of Biblical and theological interpretation exclusively as a solitary, individualistic enterprise. Such a view and practice strongly discourages the practice of attentively listening to “others,” particularly to those voices that come from other social locations, thus continuing to privilege the practice of “monistic” interpretive model.

During the past two decades, many scholars in the field of Christian education have emphasized the importance of viewing seminaries – and local congregations—as “learning communities.”<sup>12</sup> In this model of learning and teaching, the teacher is not identified as the only person who teaches; instead, all members of the learning community, both teachers and students, are recognized as potential teachers and learners. In fact, the main responsibility of the teacher, in such a setting, is to function as a facilitator, encouraging adult learners from different backgrounds to present their thoughts and insights, thus enabling the class to develop together a new level of understanding of a given topic.

Today, an increasing number of theological seminaries are attracting faculty members as well as students from various ethnic and cultural backgrounds, thus creating a space of learning and teaching, a space of theologizing that can potentially experience “Pentecostal plurality.” However, this would happen only if the institution intentionally distances itself from traditional methods of theological education, namely the exclusive reliance upon lectures given by faculty members. Instead, seminaries that enjoy the presence of many different people groups should intentionally promote different ways of learning (e.g., group projects, discussions, panel presentation etc.) that would promote rich interaction as a way of learning. Most importantly, it would be important for the seminary leadership to foster an institutional culture that promotes and values the practice of listening and of collaboration in theological teaching and learning, culture of a learning community. As faculty and students from diverse backgrounds learn to engage Scripture together in these ways, they would not only deepen their own understanding of Biblical teachings but would, in my view,

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<sup>12</sup>The following books provide helpful elaboration of the learning community concept and practice: Parker Palmer, *To Know As We Are Known: A Spirituality of Education* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1983); Jack Seymour et. al., *Educating Christians; the Intersection of Meaning, Learning, and Vocation* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1993); and, Linda Cannell, *Theological Education Matters: Leadership Education for the Church* (Newburgh, IN: EDCOT Press, 2006).

also contribute to the formation of new theological insights and categories.

#### TOWARD THE FORMATION OF “MIDDLE-RANGE” THEOLOGY

In today’s global Christian community, there are two main types of theologies. On the one hand, there is an abstract, philosophical form of theology that tends to assume its universal validity (i.e., this form of theology does not pay much attention to the “social location” of the theologian as well as of its audience). The second is various types of “local” theology that are emerging from a variety of different social locations—African, Asian, Latin, feminist, womanist etc.—reflecting the particular experiences of different groups of people in their theological reflections. In today’s postmodern setting, the latter type of theology has received much attention and affirmation, particularly in more progressive and liberal theological communities. However, while one can gain much insight from different theological voices that emerge from different social locations, “local” theologies also encounter certain limitations. For instance, a “local” theology can easily avoid any meaningful sense of accountability to the larger Christian community and can produce a theological construct that is highly relativistic.<sup>13</sup> For evangelical Christian communities that are becoming increasingly diverse and multicultural, both types of theological approaches carry with them certain limitations and liabilities. In short, today’s evangelical seminaries that are training leaders for the global church need to think creatively about an alternative way of doing theology.

During the 1960’s, well-known sociologist Robert Merton introduced the concept of “middle-range social theory” to the discipline.<sup>14</sup> In his view, the field of sociology was being dominated by two types of social theories: (1) highly abstract grand theories that were not verifiable through empirical research and (2) those theories that were too tied to a very particular social phenomenon, verifiable

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<sup>13</sup>Robert J. Schreiter, *Constructing Local Theologies* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1993), 101-104.

<sup>14</sup>Robert K. Merton, *Social Theory and Social Structure* (New York, NY: Fortress Press, 1968).



empirically, but could not yield any generalizable principles or lead to larger social theories. To Merton, as a social theorist and a researcher, neither was an attractive option. Thus he proposed a new category called “middle-range social theories” that are close enough to empirical realities to be relevant to empirical researches while, at the same time, detached somewhat from the particular social phenomenon to yield transferable and generalizable theories.

For similar reasons and concerns, perhaps the evangelical community should think about developing and nurturing what may be called “middle-range theology,” a form of theology that is neither too abstract and universalizing—theology that fails to take its own social location seriously—nor too particular—theology that is trapped within the boundary of its social location. Such a form of “middle-range theology” would be formed as theologians and pastors from different social locations dialogue with one another, bringing reflections and perspectives that are influenced by their lived experiences in particular social locations. Such a form of “middle-range theology” would be able to bring together the “universal” and the “particular” and hold them in balance and tension. In doing so, such a theology would also benefit the two other types of theology mentioned above: it would influence the more abstract theology to interact more intentionally with the particular, lived experiences in today’s world while encouraging various “local” theologies to dialogue with one another, recognizing shared beliefs as well as unique particularities. In many ways, a growing number of schools such as Torch Trinity Graduate School of Theology, as they continue to attract scholars and students from different parts of the global community, are uniquely positioned to create and nurture a theological learning community in which such a form of theology can emerge.

#### Developing a Theology of Social Justice: A Proposal

Among today’s younger evangelicals in the United States, there has been a growing interest in the Biblical theme of social justice.<sup>15</sup> In many ways, these young people are reacting against the lack of interest shown to social engagement by previous generations of fundamentalists

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<sup>15</sup>Robert Webber, *The Younger Evangelicals* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House Co., 2002), 227-36.

and evangelicals.<sup>16</sup> However, even as these evangelical Christians increasingly become active in various types of justice ministries, the evangelical theological community in the United States has not yet developed a robust theology of social justice,<sup>17</sup> thus failing to provide much needed Biblical perspectives and wisdom to this emerging activism among its youth.

Currently, there are a small but growing number of evangelical theological writings that wrestle with some aspects of social justice. Written primarily by white evangelical theologians, these writings primarily focus on the divine nature of God and how this God chooses to relate to humanity.<sup>18</sup> To put it differently, these theological reflections are a part of the abstract, universalizing theology with certain dangers and limitations mentioned above. This is especially problematic when the theological reflections deal with an issue such as social justice, a controversial issue in our society where each racial or cultural group seems to have a different understanding of what social justice might look like. Therefore, if an evangelical Christian community were to develop a theology of social justice that would enable it to proclaim and practice this Kingdom value prophetically, it needs to develop, I would suggest, a “middle-range” theology of social justice, a theology that reflects God’s nature of and concern for justice as well as current experiences of injustice that call for particular action from the Christian community.

Given this goal, I would suggest that the development of this particular theology include theologians and church leaders from different parts of the world, representing different cultural and social locations. In such a gathering, the emerging interpretive picture of God would be richly nuanced by different perspectives, thus arriving at a more comprehensive and accurate understanding of the God of justice.

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<sup>16</sup>In his book, *The Uneasy Conscience of the Modern Day Fundamentalists*, Carl F. H. Henry focuses on this phenomenon and identifies some of its causes as well as its negative impacts on the church’s credibility.

<sup>17</sup>Glen Stassen and David Gushee, *Kingdom Ethics* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 345-46.

<sup>18</sup>These works include Stephen Charles Mott’s *Biblical Ethics and Social Change* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982) 59-81, Ronald Sider’s *Just Generosity* (Grand Rapid, MI: Baker Book House Co., 1999), and Glen Stassen and David Gushee’s *Kingdom Ethics* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 345-68.

Furthermore, such a gathering would also effectively assist the group with the task of identifying the very force—the principalities of power—that opposes the justice of God’s Kingdom. As God’s people from different social locations share various forms of injustice they encounter in their daily lives, it becomes clearer what the picture of God’s justice might look like in today’s inter-connected world of globalization.

When the first church was formed in Jerusalem, one of the defining qualities it possessed was the way Christians sacrificially cared for one another (Acts 2:42-47, 4:32-37). What does it mean for today’s Christians in developed countries like the United States and South Korea to practice such a ministry of caring for fellow brothers and sisters in Christ, particularly in light of the fact that a majority of our fellow believers in today’s global Church are the poor in the Southern Hemisphere?<sup>19</sup> Today’s evangelical Christian community must develop a sound theology of social justice that is rooted in the careful exegesis of God’s Word and in the comprehensive analysis of various forms of injustice that grieves our God.

### CONCLUSION

In his recent book *Exclusion and Embrace*, Miroslav Volf passionately called for all Christians to denounce the practice of “exclusion”—the act of seeking purity of singularity—and actively pursue the practice of “embrace”—the act of intentionally integrating “otherness” into one’s own identity.<sup>20</sup> As today’s world becomes increasingly diverse and encounters the painful experience of fragmentation and inter-group hostilities, the church of Jesus Christ has a unique opportunity to be the light and the salt in this world. The church, as the body of Christ, can and should display the blessed reality of “unity in diversity” that our Savior prayed for in John 17. Such an expression of “unity in diversity” can take on a variety of forms. However, for evangelical Christians, for the people of the Book, it cannot and must not fail to include how we engage God’s Word, how

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<sup>19</sup>Philip Jenkins, *The Next Christendom: The Coming of Global Christianity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 72-78.

<sup>20</sup>Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness and Reconciliation* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1996).

we do our theology. Today's seminaries have an important calling and unique opportunities to teach and model this way of doing theology.

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