

THE VITALITY OF THE REFORMED FAITH:

Facing the Challenge of the Asian Context

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The theme of our Conference is given as “The Vitality of the Reformed Faith,” and I am assigned to speak on the subject specifically with reference to the Asian-Pacific context. Three “challenges” facing the Reformed faith have been identified for us, namely charismatic movement, individualism in church life, and Islam.

What constitutes the Asian-Pacific context, and what are the specific challenges arising from that context are matters that need further consideration. It is legitimate to ask whether these indeed are challenges in Asia, and if so they are challenges with some priority for the Reformed faith. If we survey the issues facing Christianity in Asia, it will become obvious to us that there are many other challenges facing Asian Christianity, and perhaps even more urgent ones, such as the growing persecution faced by Christians in many Asian countries.

However, since what would be expected and helpful would be an Asian reflection on these issues, I have chosen to deal with two of the identified challenges – the Charismatic Movement and Individualism in Church Life – and add another, namely, mission and ecumenicity.

It must be clarified at the outset that not considering Islam here is not because I consider Islam to be less of a challenge in the Asian context. That would truly be a mistake. Like some other religions of Asian origin, Islam has found deep roots in the Asian soil. Millions of Asians are swayed by its doctrines, philosophy and way of life. The only reason I have left it out is because of the complexity of the subject, and my own inability to deal with it within limits.

The origin of Reformed and Presbyterian [these terms are used interchangeably in this paper] churches in Asia can be traced to the missionary work of three sources: the churches in continental Europe and in the British Isles; the churches formed out of their immigrant communities in the United States and other places; and the Asian churches in the Reformed Presbyterian tradition. Today these churches that are of Reformed/Presbyterian origin are at different levels. Some have lost their reformed identity or character altogether. There are those who have more or less abandoned their tradition altogether through the influence of theological liberalism, ecumenical unions, doctrinal indifference, nationalistic spirit, or influence of other theological traditions. The Church of North India (CNI) and the Church of South India are examples of this category. It is not well known that the Reformed/Presbyterian components

in these ecumenical churches are considerable. Another category of churches maintain their Reformed identity through subscription to recognized confessional standards and by adapting a form of Presbyterian government. In addition to the historic Reformation creeds, some of these churches have their own Declarations or Affirmations that seek to address contemporary and contextual concerns. The Presbyterian Church of Taiwan is an example of this category (Hsu, 675). A third category of churches are those that maintain traditional standards, form of government, worship styles, etc. without much variation in what they received from their mother churches (Roxborough, 672-75).

In the following pages, I will take up the proposed issues one by one, attempting to focus my reflection particularly in the light of the Asian context.

CHARISMATIC MOVEMENT

When we speak of Pentecostalism, it must be kept in mind that it is not a monolithic, universal institution. Rather, it is a movement or a set of movements. The Pentecostal Movement is often described as consisting of three waves. The First Wave is also known as Classical Pentecostalism, which traces its origin to the beginning of the twentieth century in the United States. Glossolalia as evidence of Spirit baptism is the characteristic mark of Classical Pentecostalism. The Second Wave is the Charismatic Movement of the 1960's, which saw Pentecostal renewal making inroads to Protestant, Orthodox and Roman Catholic traditions. The Charismatic Movement emphasizes the use of extraordinary gifts of the Spirit and renewal of worship. The Third Wave, also known as Neo-Charismatics, includes thousands of indigenous and independent groups. (In this paper, we will use Pentecostalism and Charismatic Movement interchangeably and as referring to all three strands, except when the differences among them need to be pointed out.)

A study of the Christian population in Asia will reveal the growing prominence of Pentecostals in Asia. It is estimated that out of approximately 200 million professing Christians in Asia (2000 statistics), two-thirds (about 135 million) are of Pentecostal-Charismatic persuasion. Within this number, the neo-charismatics or the Third Wave form the largest group with 79%. They are followed by Charismatics with 16%, and Classical Pentecostals with 5%. The majority of Christians in Chinese house churches are said to be Pentecostals. Four percent of the population of Indonesia, a Muslim-dominated country, are Pentecostals. Singapore has three megachurches which are Pentecostal-Charismatic. The Full Gospel church in Seoul, Korea is the largest Christian congregation in the world.

We are conscious of the fact that numbers alone do not tell the whole story. We are also conscious of the fact that it is extremely difficult to count Pentecostal-Charismatics with accuracy because of the nature of Pentecostalism. Many churches do not maintain membership registers and other such records. To make things worse, many attending charismatic worship

services are members in traditional, established churches. In spite of these, there is enough credible statistical evidence to show that Pentecostalism is a rapidly growing movement in Asia.

The beginning of Pentecostalism in Asia is traced to the first decade of the twentieth century. In other words, its history in Asia covers the same period as its history in the west. However, as Pentecostal historians point out, it is not easy to pinpoint with any precision the beginning of Pentecostalism. Pentecostalism is more a *movement* than an organisation. A movement is not strictly limited to ecclesiastical or other such structures. Revivals with manifestations similar to that of Pentecostalism have come and gone throughout history, both within the context of the institutional church or outside of it. Pentecostal historians, in fact, claim that in many Asian countries such as India and Indonesia, Pentecostalism can be traced to the middle of the nineteenth century, roughly half a century prior to the revivals in Topeka or Azusa Street in the United States.

It may be questioned whether certain similarities in manifestations (speaking in tongues, prophecy, etc.) truly indicate that such revivals marked the beginning of Pentecostalism. How the manifestations were assessed and utilized also is important in deciding whether a particular movement can be judged to be Pentecostal. Be that as it may, the point that Pentecostal historians are making is an important one. That is, Pentecostalism in Asia is not an import, but rather something indigenous to Asia that pre-dated Pentecostalism in the west, and independent of western missions (McGee, 647-48).

The question is not merely of academic or historical interest. It makes no difference to our present discussion whether Pentecostalism “began” in Asia or North America, or whether Asian and western Pentecostalism are similar but unrelated and independent movements. The point of significance for us is its indigenous character. It has been argued that the indigenous character of Pentecostalism is a significant factor in its popularity and phenomenal growth. That is to say, one of the reasons Pentecostalism has been hugely successful in Asia is due to the fact that it belongs to the Asian soil. Its forms, expressions and style (if not substance) reflect Asian characteristics. Adaptability to culture is pointed out as another factor in the growth of Pentecostalism. In a book on Pentecostalism, with a suggestive sub-title, “*A Religion Made to Travel*,” Byron D. Klaus asserts that adaptability is a quality that belongs to Pentecostalism in general. “Pentecostalism has been the quintessential indigenous religion, adapting readily to a variety of cultures. As a religious movement it has taken on the likeness of a particular cultural of people” (Klaus, 127).

The impact of Pentecostalism is felt in one way or another in all the historic denominations in Asia, including Reformed and Presbyterian Churches. In my analysis, this impact could be further delineated in the following four paradigms:

1) Members of Reformed/Presbyterian churches leaving their folds to join Pentecostal churches. It has often been alleged that Pentecostals grow through “sheep stealing”. Some studies I have seen about the growth of Pentecostal churches seem to confirm such a suspicion. In many Pentecostal congregations, baptisms of people from other religions are negligible compared to those who were previously members of other congregations. I do not think we

have sufficient data to assert conclusively that this is the pattern of growth in all Asian Pentecostal churches. Further, a few other factors need to be kept in mind. One is that Pentecostalism considers itself a “renewal” movement, and so it is natural that they would consider as their primary mission “converting” the “nominal Christians” and correcting the theology of those who have been allegedly misled by traditional churches. Secondly, we may note that Reformed/Presbyterian churches do not consider it wrong to draw people of other churches to their perspective. Though we do not have reason to think this is happening in large scale, or that a strategy of bringing Pentecostals to Reformed/Presbyterian fold is consciously applied, we cannot deny that such mobility exists. I am told that in the Indian state of Sikkim, while Pentecostals are growing, sooner or later many of them become Presbyterians. This is partly due to the historically dominant position of Presbyterians in that state. But that some of this flow is also due to people’s disillusionment with superficial experientialism and dissatisfaction with answers that do not satisfy. A third factor we need to consider in this context is that this movement towards Pentecostalism is not entirely unacceptable. In fact, we have reason to rejoice in this because many in traditional churches have found genuine, new life in Christ through Pentecostal mission work. We need not deny that many traditional churches do not exhibit the Reformational marks of the true church. There is no sign of life in many mainline churches, and members living with no assurance of salvation, or are under a false sense of security in these churches, need the gospel as much as non-Christians outside. Finally, we can rejoice in the fact that the Charismatic Movement has served as a catalyst for renewal in mainline churches. Pentecostal zeal in proselytizing has provoked the mainline churches and their leaders to attend to their duties – to teach and defend their faith to their own members.

2) Members, while retaining their membership in their churches, becoming active participants in Pentecostal churches. In some respects, this is a symbiotic relationship. It is not unusual in many cities to see people attending the early service or mass so that they can rush to the charismatic service in the megachurch nearby. The difference between this syndrome and the previous one is that in this model, people do not actually leave their own congregations and memberships, but depend on a renewal church for their spiritual nourishment and fellowship. Some may even go to the extent of being (secretly) re-baptised to become part of the new fellowship. But they want to do all these without breaking their old ties and loyalties. We may conjecture that the reason for retaining the old ties is mainly social or economical – wanting to be part of the right social crowd, not losing conveniences such as cemetery privileges (often controlled by mainline churches), getting benefits such as admission and job reservations for their children, etc. (These may be considerations particularly Asian or Third World, but their importance cannot be overlooked.) The mainline churches accommodate (or at least close their eyes to) these practices because it may be counterproductive to force the issue as far as they are concerned. One may suspect that, if forced, many such in two pales will declare their loyalty to be with the Charismatic groups. That will be a certain loss for mainline churches that are already dwindling in numbers and income. Charismatic churches, on the other hand, accommodate such people by convenient worship times, taking a “spiritual” view of church membership, etc. In fact, charismatics are eager not only to steal but also to woo the

mainliners. Crusades of well known charismatic evangelists are graced by bishops and other respected church leaders. As I said, it is very much a symbiotic relationship.

3) Charismatic style and pattern of worship becoming more common in Reformed/Presbyterian churches. This model is perhaps the one in which the charismatic impact is most clearly visible and felt. Since the charismatic renewal movement of the sixties, all over the world, and in Asia too, this is a reality. Reformed/Presbyterian churches are not exempt from this effect. It is noted that out of fourteen megachurches in Korea (with 12,000 plus attendance), seven are Charismatic Presbyterians (Tong-Hap and Hap-Dong) (Burgess, 132). We may not be amiss in stating that this influence is felt not only in megachurches but even in small congregations, though the hype may not be so evident in the latter. To assess the Charismatic influence in Reformed/Presbyterian worship in Asia we may need to distinguish between two types of influences. Many churches have become “charismatic” in worship style through ignorance, by imitation, or a combination of both. The Charismatic Movement of the 1960’s, and to an extent the Third Wave as well, were primarily worship renewal movements. Following this, worship resources from these groups became commonly available and popular in Asia as in other places. (It is to be noted that most of these resources come from the west, and have nothing of Asian context in them.) Many churches without theologically trained worship leaders and pastors began to use such resources without discernment. This is one way in which Charismatic worship patterns became popular in Asian Reformed/Presbyterian churches. But there is another, more historical, explanation of the influence of charismatic style or (something similar) in Reformed/ Presbyterian churches. That is by way of revivals (which may be distinguished from renewal movements). It is an undeniable fact that historically, Reformed/Presbyterian churches are not strangers to revivals as sovereign movements of the Holy Spirit. Neither can it be denied that revivals often resulted in “charismatic-style” manifestations, and even (sinful) excesses. The revival tradition, and the accompanying results and effects were often continued in some Reformed/Presbyterian churches. The Mizo Presbyterian church in Northeast India is a case in point. This Church was affected by a series of revivals in its history, and their impact can be observed in their worship even today. The Revival of 1919, which resulted in the growth of the Church by the thousands, also saw certain excessive, emotional tendencies and questionable practices. One historian notes that excessive use of the traditional drums (previously disallowed in worship by missionaries) almost forced out prayer and preaching. Continuous dancing, limping, rolling on the ground, speaking in tongues, and other ecstatic activities were commonplace (Lloyd, 191-95).

4) The Charismatic doctrine of Christian life becoming more and more accepted in Reformed/Presbyterian congregations. Though perhaps less obvious or evident, this impact is real, and is in some ways a greater threat to Reformed/Presbyterian theology. Again, this should not be seen as a brand new challenge. It has been noted that well known Presbyterian missionaries such as John Nevius and Jonathan Goforth practiced exorcism during their ministry in China (McGee, 647). Distinctly charismatic teachings are becoming accepted doctrines among many non-charismatics. Neo-charismatic (Third Wave) teachers and preachers are influencing non-Pentecostals including those of the Reformed faith. This is happening largely through the influence of various television programs and channels, mostly of western origin.

Health and healing is the area where this influence is most strongly felt. Ill health is a universal and most basic concern of mankind. In Asia, with its many pockets of poverty and lack of medical care, ordinary people are dependent on God's direct intervention in healing. So it is natural that those who emphasise healing would receive much attention and very little evaluation. Evangelists with the "gift of healing" are often sought out by people. This is not necessarily a rejection of the leadership of local pastors and elders. But it is assumed that they are helpless in this matter, not possessing the gift. Thus the Pentecostal theology of healing becomes implicitly accepted in our churches. Also present, but perhaps not so commonly, are such things as casting out demons, curses and blessings, and a utilitarian idea of God.

How shall we assess the impact of Pentecostalism on Reformed/Presbyterian churches? An evaluation of Pentecostalism or even Asian Pentecostalism as such is not what is mainly in view here. Rather, the main question for us now is: What shall we think of the impact? How serious is its challenge? What response shall we give? Our response to Pentecostalism cannot be, need not be, merely negative. The vitality of the Reformed faith in facing the challenge of Pentecostalism in the Asian context is not by simply rejecting it, but by engaging it on the authority and basis of the Scriptures. In that spirit, I would like to raise a few points for a Reformed-Pentecostal dialogue. Such a dialogue would involve not merely a criticism of the other, but also a self-introspection.

It goes without saying that our primary concern is not with numbers. Such a concern is less than worthy of the glory of God, and may even be considered idolatrous. To an extent, we can even be thankful to God that the gospel is preached and people are being saved (cf. Phil 1:15-18).

Our concern, rather, is a concern for the dilution/adulteration of the truth of God's Word, and the danger it poses for the life of God's people, the Church. I would highlight the following general dangers. 1) The perception many faithful saints have that they are ordinary or even second class Christians because they lack one or another spectacular gift. Pentecostal theologians themselves have acknowledged that within Pentecostalism there is a sense of spiritual pride and tendency to look down upon "ordinary" Christians whose worship and life are more prosaic. 2) The tendency to use gifts selfishly. Catering to the hunger for power through the misuse of gifts was a concern in Paul's day, as is evident from his discussions on spiritual gifts and the body (I Cor 12-14). The tendency continues even today. Asian evangelists selling holy oil blessed by them for healing power, collecting money for intercessory prayer, and other such things point to a return to pre-Reformation practices. Without doubt, these are a gross misuse of one's (alleged) gifts. 3) Even more serious is the damage caused by superficial, and even deliberately false teachings propagated, such as lack of faith is the main reason why miracles are not happening. Many thronging to healers return empty-handed. Not only is the compassion of Christ withheld from them, they are also blamed apparently for not having something they cannot earn. 4) We must also view with great concern the emergence of a class of modern-day "super-apostles". Like in Paul's day and throughout church history, they are misleading God's people. But not only that, they are in effect usurping the ministry and authority of ecclesiastical leadership authorized in the Scripture, particularly in the Pastoral

Epistles. The responsibility given to the elders (James 5; Acts 20), and the caring-sharing-nurturing local fellowship of believers are in very real danger of being taken over by itinerant evangelists and mega-churches. 5) The ministry of this class of “crusade evangelists” benefits primarily their own organizations rather than local churches. Further, in the present politically-sensitive atmosphere in Asia, their activities are causing great damage to the church in Asia. Many of these evangelists are from the west, and insist on a show. Their mega-conventions, executed with great hype and noise, attract the attention of everyone. Asian people do not see the efforts of these evangelists as humble witness to the Lord Jesus Christ, but as neo-colonialist expressions of naked money power intended to convert them. After they leave, the local churches are left to bear the ill will and persecution. 6) The methods used by these charismatic preachers are affecting the mission and witness of the Church as unbelievers see them exploiting the weak and unlearned. While we need not doubt the genuineness of all, sufficient fraud has been exposed in these ministries. Ordinary people view with suspicion many claims of healings, casting out of demons, etc. We are not talking of a mere embarrassment here. Like in the days of the apostles, there will always be those who will ridicule the genuine movements of the Spirit. But trickery and deception are things strongly condemned by the Apostles, for they wished to persuade people by the open statement of the truth (II Cor 4:1-3). 7) The anthropocentric and experience-oriented worship is another area of great concern. Even Pentecostal theologians are beginning to recognize the dangers of a utilitarian God and consumerist religion. 8) While the indigenous element in Pentecostalism is much lauded and recognized as a reason for its popularity, syncretistic tendencies also are operative in it. Animistic, Buddhist and Confucian influences in Pentecostalism have been acknowledged by many Pentecostal theologians. In fact, some Pentecostal theologians, following the guidance of Harvey Cox, stress the need to “incorporate elements of pre-existing religions to the faith” (Eng and Shah, 69). 9) In some respects, the claims of indigeneity are wildly exaggerated. “Due to lack of adequate tools and training, the teaching of smaller independent groups in particular is often determined by the latest trend in North American or European Pentecostalism as expounded by a visiting evangelist or itinerant preacher” (Satyavrata, 209).

The challenge of Pentecostalism is also a challenge to re-examine our doctrine and life more carefully under the authority of God’s Word. Some potential areas where such re-examination can take place may be mentioned below.

At the very least, there should be the acknowledgment that Pentecostalism has brought to Reformed Christianity an awareness that our love for God expressed in worship and life must be with the totality of our being. As spirit-body beings, we need to praise God not only with our intellect but also with our bodies and emotions. It will not be incorrect to say that at times in our (western) Reformed thinking there is still too much left over paganism of medieval Christianity. The bias towards the rational/intellectual aspects of man, and its counterparts, distrust of emotions and suspicion of body, are evidences of this. Such a bias can be seen from John Calvin to Gordon Clark, and is not consistent with the rest of our theology. Perhaps this is one reason why Pentecostalism appeals to the Asian temperament. Confessing our faith as

“intellectually affirming a set of propositions as true” is reductionistic and simply alien to Asian spirituality, and to the Bible. Raising our hands in worship or genuine emotional or bodily expressions need not be ruled out as “charismatic,” provided they do not become artificial, means of spiritual pride or new legalisms. Sometimes out of a wrong interpretation of worshipping in spirit, or out of concern for “decency and order” we have sought to make worship the least appealing to senses and affections. At times, the concern for orderliness in worship comes across as performance, whereas what seems to be chaotic appeals to Asian believers as sincere expressions of piety.

Pentecostalism challenges us to re-consider our theology of spiritual gifts. As a result of charismatic renewal, there is a greater emphasis on the role of spiritual gifts in the body of Christ. This emphasis has democratized the church, with its understanding that all the people of God are gifted by God, and are equipped for ministry. It has brought to greater fulfillment the Reformation principle of priesthood of all believers. Classical Pentecostalism erred grievously in elevating one gift particularly over all the others and making it a test of spirituality (now conceded as an error even by other charismatics). Pentecostals also have sometimes given into the error of eliminating offices in the church (“anyone may preach so long as gifted”), or making offices in an unbiblical manner (designating some as “Apostles,” for example). As pointed out earlier, the overemphasis on gifts has resulted in misuse and imbalance. The work of the Spirit in salvation, for example, is almost drowned out by the amount of attention paid to gifts. Notwithstanding these, it is fair to say that charismatic renewal has brought a needed corrective, which is a true and proper part of Reformed theology.

Connected to the discussion on gifts is the question of Cessationism. The issue is whether certain gifts known as “extra-ordinary gifts” or “revelatory gifts” such as prophecy and speaking in tongue continue even today or whether they ceased with the close of the apostolic age. Charismatics are non-cessationists, holding the view that all gifts are still extant. Reformed/Presbyterian theology, generally speaking, favours cessationism. The division exists in Asia as in other parts of the world along the same lines. One cannot say that there is any serious dialogue on this matter at present in Asia. Certain hard questions need to be raised: 1) Is there biblical justification for dividing the gifts into “ordinary” and “extra-ordinary”? Or, do these categories betray our historical prejudices or embarrassment concerning manifestations that cannot be explained rationally or by natural explanations? Is it wrong to assume that certain gifts (even offices, such as the office of “apostle”) that may have had a unique function in the apostolic age can continue in modified forms (instead of ceasing to exist) in the post-apostolic age? 2) Do our confessions teach cessation of certain gifts or cessation of authoritative revelation of which the canonical revelation is the inspired and infallible record? We can be certain that the confessions teach the authority of Scripture as God’s Word and the sufficiency of Scripture. It is clear that “new revelations of the Spirit” are not to be added to the Scripture, and that “private spirits” are to be judged by the Scriptures. But do such “revelations” exist, and if they do, what is their validity? 3) Without denying the once-for-all “event” character of Pentecost, can we also see it as an “experience” that can be repeated (as seems to be the case in Acts 8, 10 and 19) as the church expands? In other words, is a repetition of the experience possible without a repetition of the event? Can the recurrence of Pentecost-

like experience be explained as part of the Holy Spirit's work in the context of new frontiers as the church grows?

Individualism in Church Life

Some justification is necessary before we consider "individualism" as a challenge facing Reformed Christianity in the context of Asia. The concept of individualism is so closely linked with western political and social thought. It is often considered alien to the Asian ethos. Superficially viewed, individualism may not be considered as an issue for church life in Asia. So, in analyzing this problem in the Asian context, we may need to approach it from a different angle than one would from the west – considering whether individualism is gaining ground in Asia, and even asking whether it is necessarily a bad thing.

Although the general traditional picture of Asia and the west can be seen as opposites, it is no more correct to say "Oh, East is East, and West is West, and never the twain shall meet" (Kipling). They have been meeting for quite some time. Through colonialism and other interactions in the political-social realm, the west has been confronting Asia, challenging its values, claims and attitudes. (The reverse also is true, but that is not a concern in this context.) Indian nationalism, for example, had its beginnings in the influence of western liberalism, which was both individualist and egalitarian (Gray, 9-12). The gospel and western culture were responsible to a large extent in raising the awareness of the rights and duties of the individual. Many architects of contemporary Asia (such as Jawaharlal Nehru) were educated along the lines of western liberalism. Christian mission also played a part in this process through its preaching of the God-given dignity of the individual. More recently, globalization has impacted traditional Asian culture resulting in a certain amount of cultural "homogenization" (Francis Fukuyama's term). Some social scientists even question the very notion of "Asian values". It has been suggested that the very concept of Asian values is reactionary, politicized, and too generalized to be of any analytical use. Other social scientists (such as Samuel Huntington) reject any such tendency. Most of the discussion on this subject has been with regard to economic realities.

Similar to the above impact on Asia by colonialism, liberalism, globalization, etc. in the political and social spheres, there has been a corresponding impact in the spiritual realm also. The nineteenth century missionary movement was a crucial factor in this impact. The missionary movement may not have been a "success" in the sense that it resulted in the conversion of Asia. But it most certainly made an impact on Asia's spiritual values, challenging them at their core. The gospel preached by the missionaries contained the message of dignity for the individual, which helped many to challenge oppression by dominant groups as well as slavery to one's own traditional (group) identities and values. More recently, individualism has been entering Asian church life through the widespread influence of American evangelicalism of various stripes. Through Television ministries or through more traditional missionary activities, evangelical agencies are influencing Asian church life to a large extent. The spirit of competition is no less evident in mission agencies than in the economic sphere. The influence

of Pentecostalism in Asia itself is probably the best example. Pentecostalism has elevated “individual experience” to such an extent that other factors that used to hold religious communities together – such as a common historical tradition, denominational loyalty, etc. – are being abandoned without hesitation. Such an emphasis on “personal experience and on individual interpretation of experience” is worrying even Pentecostal theologians to the point of asking whether what we are witnessing is “the globalization of Pentecostalism or globalization of individualism” (Pluess, 170,78). Others see ecclesiocentrism and submission to strong leadership (“a structure of leadership hierarchy”) as necessary to avert “pride and individualism” (Eng and Shah, 89-90).

What we may conclude from the above discussion is that Asian cultures and values are not at a standstill. Individualism is increasingly going to be a part of social life, and correspondingly, of church life in Asia. Churches are also beginning to take note of this shift as a factor in their ministry. However, it is certainly premature to think that Asian values are going to disappear in the near future and will be replaced by western values.

It is well-known that traditionally, Asian cultures were considered more collective-oriented than western cultures. If so, it is only natural that this trait will be reflected in church life as well. Group orientation of one sort or other can easily be demonstrated in Asian cultures. This could be in the form of family, clan, language, tribe, caste or other such identity. Such a pattern of social structure is usually cemented by three related factors: a pyramidal, authoritarian style of leadership; a high value placed on discipline; and the concept of shame. These elements are more or less present in almost all Asian societies in varying measures. Perhaps Confucian cultures fit the pattern the most, but tribal cultures as well as caste-based societies also display this combination. From authoritarianism to dictatorship, from guided democracy to people’s democracy, post-colonial Asian history has many examples of such cohesions.

The interesting thing is that, generally, such group orientations are showcased as a matter of pride by Asian leaders, and envied by those in the west. Superficially at least, one must admit, they have a certain attraction. Members of a society working together for the common welfare, even willing to sacrifice one’s interest for the sake of the group has a certain idealistic, altruistic ring to it. The economic success of ASEAN nations has been attributed to these values.

We will leave aside the question whether these “Asian values” are the key to the success of East Asian economies. But we must ask how this social structure has affected church life. Has this been a better model for the church than, say, western individualism?

In the context of the church also, traditional Asian values are looked at as something positive. Pentecostal theologian Jungja Ma gives an accurate perception of the Asian culture.

Asians are group- or family-oriented. Maintaining “dignity”, ‘respect’, ‘honour’, and harmonious relationships are highly important. The most valued human qualities are those which help preserve group loyalties and which maintain congenial social relationships. Asians, in general, view the group, and not the

individual, as the building block of the society. People do not see themselves as autonomous, but as members of the groups to which they belong (Jungja Ma, 190).

Then he bemoans the fact that “the mindset of the people is shifting from a group-orientation to an individualistic and task-orientation” (Jungja Ma, 184). Free market economies will result in the loss of the “relational orientation” of people. Self-worth will be based on success. Affluence will be sought after. He concludes: “This new and emerging work ethic has a profound impact on the social life of the people. Coupled with individualism, the spirit of competition is everywhere, including the churches. Everyone is viewed as a competitor rather than a co-worker” (Jungja Ma, 190).

Reflected in the above response, which may be considered typical of many churches, is an anxiety in facing modernity. Modernity inevitably will shake up traditional patterns of society, and the temptation of the church is to retreat to the traditional patterns with their theological justifications we are so familiar with – the loss of community, competition, greed, etc. Without losing sight of the concerns raised, the church must also recognize that the traditional patterns of society have not always been consistent with the values of the Kingdom of God. They have often resulted in oppression, injustice, poverty, and stagnation.

In spite of appearance to the contrary, these traditional values have been detrimental to church life in Asia. No one has argued this thesis better than M.M. Thomas, the well-known ecumenical theologian who had an intimate knowledge of Asian realities. Some of his theological evaluation of such group identities may be mentioned here. 1) These group identities, (commonly called communalism in India, with parallels such as tribalism, casteism, and regionalism) are no less idolatrous than individualism because they elevate and absolutise narrow identities. The only difference is that instead of the individual self, it is the collective self that is on the throne. 2) They have an appearance of community without really being so. One’s caste, tribe or language becomes the criterion for fellowship. They do not correspond to the *koinonia* of the Kingdom of God. They do not reflect the New Humanity in Christ, in which there is neither Greek nor Jew, slave nor free, male nor female. 3) They are a real barrier to ecumenism. 4) Further, they are a hindrance to the mission of the Church. A Church that is tied to one’s ethnicity or other such factor cannot have an openness to the world, without which there cannot be any mission. Asian group orientations in many contexts make the church introverted, with a minority consciousness that prevents it from engaging the world (Chacko, 125-50).

How this group consciousness, with related factors, affects ecclesiastical life can be illustrated with numerous concrete examples. Violent conflicts between Christian tribes, churches that refuse to admit dalits (“untouchables”) to their membership, strong resistance to local ecumenism even among churches that affirm the very same doctrinal standards, all are consequences of group-consciousness in Asia. Echoes of authoritarianism in society can be heard in ecclesiastical leadership as well. Many Asian church leaders consider Presbyterian form of church government as an unworkable model for Asia. “We need strong leadership” is their cry. It is interesting that many Pentecostal and evangelical churches have consciously adopted Episcopalian form of government, in spite of the widespread corruption and abuse of power in

mainline Episcopal churches. Presbyterian churches are not without their own problems. Moderators are often expected to act like bishops, and authoritarianism is often misunderstood as strong leadership. Because of the traditional pyramidal order brought in from society, leadership in the church stagnates with the same people continuing in office for long stretches of time. Youth and others are hesitant to voice their opinion or are not taken seriously because of this social structure. Strong group identity, and the culture of shame associated with it, makes it almost impossible for individuals to follow Christ from other religious communities. The hindrance in people converting to Christian faith is more often sociological than theological. Being ostracized from one's community or village or caste is a shame too heavy for many to bear. But these are true not only with regard to conversions, but also in the church, in following one's theological convictions or living according to one's ethical convictions.

In summary, we may observe that group loyalty and identity are still values that are predominant in Asia. Individualism in social and church life can be expected to be a growing reality in the future. However, this trend need not be looked at as an entirely negative development. In fact, much of it is the result of the impact of the gospel itself. It is to be welcomed to the extent that it challenges the idolatry of the group identities.

Mission and Ecumenicity

In recent years we have seen two trends in missionary activities in the context of Asia. One is the emergence of missionary activity from within Asian countries. This is a significant shift from the earlier model, where the missionary almost by definition was a white westerner. The second trend that I have observed is the increase of westerners entering Asia as missionaries in non-traditional modes. Both of these trends are significant for Reformed Christianity in Asia, though other churches also are affected. Therefore, a few comments on these are in order.

Missionary activity from one Asian nation to another is a welcome shift in many ways. It indicates the "coming of age" of Asian churches which, until recently, were at the receiving end. Asian churches are slowly awakening to the fact that the Great Commission is for them also, and that they have a responsibility in making the gospel known in Asia. Asian missionary interest in Asia is not completely of recent origin as witnessed by the Back-to-Jerusalem movement of the churches in China. However, this interest has grown along with the growth in resources and other capabilities of Asian nations. India is a leader in indigenous mission movements with thousands of cross-cultural missionaries, most within the country, but increasingly more and more in other Asian countries. The Presbyterian Church in Mizoram has a very ambitious cross-cultural program, including work in Nepal and in other Asian countries. The Philippines is another nation that is taking on the responsibility of sending out missionaries. Without doubt, the most remarkable growth of missionary movement in Asia is taking place in Korea, which is set to be the most missionary-sending church in the world. It is estimated that there are about 18,000 Korean missionaries in about 180 countries around the world (Hwa

Yung, 2; Julie Ma, 4). Since a large number of Korean missionaries are from Presbyterian churches, this is of special interest to us.

The phenomenon of Asian mission to Asia needs more scientific study to reach firm conclusions. But some observations and concerns may be raised here. The following observations will show that in some respects, contemporary Asian missions are following the wrong paths followed by previous generations of missions and missionaries.

1) There is great deal of emphasis on numbers both with regard to missionaries sent and churches planted. This is consistent with mission practices of contemporary evangelicalism in general, and need not be seen as wrong in itself. However, a deeper analysis would show that the overemphasis on numbers is not without its dangers. Mission strategies are often borrowed uncritically from the Church Growth movement and other evangelical agencies, without examining how they measure up to Reformed understandings of the gospel and salvation. Such schemes have often led not only to un-Reformed but even unethical practices, including manipulation of figures either for recognition or fundraising. The quality of converts and churches is rarely examined. Even Reformed Christianity has bought into this whole philosophy of mission as setting targets and meeting quotas.

2) Generally speaking, the flow of mission resources has been from the more advanced or developed Asian nations to the less advanced ones. In this respect, the present trend parallels the nineteenth century missionary movement. Though there is nothing inherently wrong with this, Asian missionaries also are subject to the dangers of triumphalism and arrogance that sometimes characterized western missions in the past. Ethnocentrism, cultural arrogance, paternalism, etc. are ever-present dangers in contemporary Asian mission. "The danger today is that Asian churches, with all their newfound riches, will repeat the same mistakes of mission history" (Yung, 2).

3) A third observation is that Asian missions are very rigid in their approach to mission. There is very little understanding or appreciation of the unique factors in the receptive cultures. This is the way the church grew at home, so let us repeat the same here is the usual justification. Missionaries insist on local workers slavishly following their way of evangelism and training whether or not they are suitable in the new context. The opinions of local workers is rarely sought or practiced. The emphasis on the practice of prayer as essential to church growth is an example. In a certain Seminary in India run by certain Asian missionaries, students will not be served meals unless they have participated in the early morning prayer. While no one would disagree with the emphasis on prayer, the insistence on when, how and how long one should pray often leads to legalism.

4) Doctrinal indifference is another concern for Reformed Christianity. The concern for church growth dominates all other concerns, and as a result theology is often downplayed. There are many "Presbyterian" seminaries where there are no faculty members holding to the Reformed faith. Their chapel time is no different than that of the charismatic seminary next door. Often the hidden assumption is that a generic form of Christianity is adequate in the Asian situation, or that Calvinistic Christianity is a luxury. In this respect also, the work of Asian

missions parallels missionary work of the past. The gospel that was preached in Asian cultures even by Reformed missions often brought about only superficial change in the lives of the converts. Transformation of cultures or worldviews was not considered significant. This approach has resulted in churches that are more “fundamentalist” than Reformed. The lack of a deeper understanding of what it means to be “Reformed” has resulted in indifference to doctrines. As a result, many churches were easily swallowed up by theological liberalism and ecumenical unions, and lost their Reformed identity within a generation. If contemporary Asian missions continue in the path of doctrinal indifference, the outcome cannot be any different.

5) Lack of cooperation with existing churches is another concern. Asian missionaries, sent out either by churches or parachurch organizations, ignore churches that already exist in the area. Instead of cooperation, they tend to distance themselves from established churches. This could be due to a number of reasons including theological or spiritual feeling of superiority.

These are matters of serious concern for the life and work of Reformed/Presbyterian churches in Asia. In some respects, Asian missionaries seem to be in a hurry to repeat all the mistakes made by nineteenth century missionaries.

The second major trend in contemporary Asian Mission is the entry of a large number of “non-traditional” missionaries from the west. Traditional missionaries who were sent by a church or a mission board, did not hide their missionary identity, had a long-term commitment to the place of their calling, and were linked with the local church from the very beginning. Contemporary non-traditional missionaries do not share these characteristics.

Political and other factors were instrumental in changing the traditional patterns of mission. Many countries in Asia are “closed” to mission work. This reality forced the church to adopt new strategies such as the use of non-traditional missionaries. The category of non-traditional missionaries includes a variety of personnel ranging from freelancers to short term visitors. Some are “tent-makers” or those who work “under cover”. Some simply employ national workers as surrogates, their own involvement in mission limited to managing and writing reports. They are reluctant to associate with the local church, lest their true identities be revealed.

While we must be careful not to generalize or to be uncharitable, the presence of this new class of missionaries and their strategy need examination. Unlike the traditional missionaries who identified with the people and became involved in the life of their people through numerous services, the non-traditional missionary keeps his distance from the people, apparently to protect himself. Long-term commitment and sacrificial spirit of the traditional missionary, as evidenced by multiple terms of service in a field, are lacking in the non-traditional missionary. The most serious charge that may be laid is their total lack of accountability to the national church. Agencies and missionaries function often with very little consultation with existing churches. Without being unsympathetic to their predicament, we may also state that ecclesiologically and missiologically, this is a very unhealthy state of affairs.

Ecumenism in the Asian context, or the lack of it, is another challenge to Reformed Christianity in Asia. Ecumenism in the past was often motivated by indifference to our theological traditions. While we must reject such kinds of ecumenism, cooperation and unity among churches that affirm the same confessions and the evangelical faith is an urgent need.

What is working against meaningful cooperation and fellowship among Reformed/Presbyterian churches in Asia is not theological differences but our sinful spirit of competition, dependency and selfishness. Our churches in Asia, especially in the developing nations, are still dependent on resources from the west. They do not see the need to work together and share local resources for the glory of God. Perhaps they will not see this need unless they are encouraged to do so by their supporting churches.

In this respect, the churches in the west are not without blame. Whenever possible, church and mission agencies must initiate and encourage common efforts in a certain region. Theological education, training of elders, development of liturgical and other resources for the church, sharing of expertise, and a number of other activities can be promoted through ecumenical structures instead of developing them individually for each church. It is not necessary to lose one's denominational identity or unique ties with one's ecclesiastical tradition. But refusal to cooperate in areas where cooperation is possible and desired, only promotes a spirit of completion and disunity resulting in wasting precious resources that could be used for other important tasks.

The challenges that face Reformed Christianity in Asia are numerous. But our biblical, historic faith is not without resources to confront them. As Reformed Christians we need to see how we can adapt more to the Asian context without becoming syncretistic. We need to affirm that Reformed Christianity offers a richer, more solid alternative to fundamentalism and experientialism. Our practices in mission and inter-church relations have to become more conformed to a Reformed ecclesiology.

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