Reflections on the Inaugural Asian American Equipping Symposium

admitted, that he too does not run toward his son but waits for his son to show up to him.

On Tuesday, Tran addressed why Asian American Churches are the Future. The panelists included Charlene Jin Lee, Timothy Tseng, Charles Lee, and Benjamin Shin. Gender issues in Asian American churches in particular, discussed by Charlene Jin Lee, captivated everyone. Tran continued dialogue by email exchanges with Jin Lee even after his return to Texas. The luncheon speaker, Tommy Dyo, a Fuller alumnus from the 1990s, shared a history of Asian American students at Fuller.

The breakout sessions, under the guidance and leadership of Jonathan Wu and Melanie Mar Chew, participants were divided into four topics for discussion and strategic thinking:

1. The future of Asian American pastoral leadership
2. The future of Asian American women in ministry
3. The future of the intergenerational Asian American church
4. The future of theological formation in Asian American churches

We are grateful to all who participated in such constructive conversations and substantive outcomes. We deeply appreciate participants' clear recommendations to keep traction and momentum going forward.

One necessity for such traction and momentum is documentation. This issue of the SANACS journal is an ideal setting for just such documentation. May these papers help the November 2009 Asian American Equipping Symposium continue to bear good fruit for both the academy and the church.

INTRODUCTION

The social theorist Naomi Klein speaks of "an impulse to dream" and the need for us to "think our way out of the present." We live in a world of crushing homogeneity that wants to make us all the same. In the context, we have become impoverished dreamers. In a world of overwhelming suffering, violence, and sadness, our dreams have become small, our impulses diminished, thinking beyond the present unlikely. I offer you two presentations as attempts at dreaming, as a way to think our way out of the present.

I want to talk about the single most important issue I believe is facing the Asian American church, and that is its future. It is certainly a goofy academic thing to say that the future is the greatest challenge to any community, for of course, the future of a community is always its greatest challenge. But when I say the future is the greatest issue facing Asian American church, I don't mean simply what will happen to it, will it survive, how will it grow, so on and so forth. Of course these are questions that demand the attention of our pastoral and seminary leaders. But by "future" I mean something more specific.

When I say the future is the issue facing the Asian American church I mean that because of its current identity, constitution, its historical development and its likely trajectory, I wonder how it is that the Asian American church will survive into the future, or whether or not it will survive, or whether that which survives will continue to be faithful to its unique calling.

What makes me worry that the Asian American church has no future? Is it

1 Klein makes these comments in the documentary, "The Possibility of Hope," written, directed, and produced by Alfonso Cuaron and embedded in the 2006 Universal Pictures DVD Children of Men.
because the church isn’t coming up with innovative new ministries? Is it because it isn’t developing a new core of leaders and a new vision? Is it because it hasn’t renovated its buildings, or updated its technology, or changed out its worship styles to fit the newly emergent context of late modern capitalism, that it hasn’t kept pace with the internet revolution and globalization? Do I worry that the Asian American church is not concerned with the future enough, and therefore does not have a future?

No, my fear is not that the Asian American church has no concern for the future, but rather that its interests are so focused on the future that it has little concern for the past. It simply lacks a past sufficient for its survival. In recent years, as the Asian American church has emerged from the Asian church in America, it has become so enamored with a certain kind of future, a certain kind of survival, so interested in innovation and new things (new worship, new buildings, new pews, new styles) that it has relinquished the best parts of itself in order to purchase a future that will prove incommensurate to its calling. It has traded in its past, its history, its constitution as a tradition, and in doing so has left behind the resources it, like any moral tradition, needs to survive faithfully into the future.

More importantly, the problem with leaving behind your past is that your past is the only record Christians have that God will be faithful to them in the future. The Bible is the church’s living memory of God’s faithfulness; only by attuning our lives to it, do we know what the future holds, what kinds of futures are good for us, and that we have a future at all (Lk. 1). For Christians, the past is not just the past, but the always present promise that God remains with us.2

The noted political theorist Hannah Arendt believed that any moral community exists at each moment between past and future. It is in this instance, in this fragile and always vanishing moment between past and future, that a community determines itself from the past for the future. According to Arendt, the past bestows a community the resources to know how to negotiate the unknowable future, to chart a course when the present is always vanishing. It is by the past that one generation passes on to the next generation a viable future for its children. Without the past, no community can know how to go on.

As a Jew and a German migrant to America during the Nazi era, Arendt could speak with some authority about what it means to survive. As a Jew she understood well that the past, and the past’s many testaments to God, provided a community the courage to imagine a future even in the darkest present. As a German she knew that without a strong anchoring in the past, the future will not only breed monstrousities, but perhaps more deadly, a community will lack the resources to know how to fend off those monsters. And as an American, Arendt was keenly aware that the now is always only as good as the past from which it comes.4

So what do I mean when I say that the Asian American church lacks a past, and therefore also a future? Simply, to the extent that the Asian American church identifies itself as an over-against, a leaving behind, and a separation from. From what is the Asian American church over against, leaving behind, and separating? First, Asian American Christianity sits racially over against non-Asian American Christians; without its brothers and sisters, it loses its past as a common faith. Second, Asian American Christianity grows up by leaving behind its first generation forebears; without its immigrant mother churches, it abandons its past as a common story. Third, Asian American Christianity separates itself from the theological tradition that though God has no time in him, he, out of love for us his faithful creatures is eternally present to time through the incarnation of the Word and the ongoing presence of the Holy Spirit. For the Christian church, there can be no future without its past. See, for example, Thomas Aquinas, Summa Theologiae, II.110.2, II.111.1. Karl Barth, Church Dogmatics, III.1: The Doctrine of God (London & New York: T & T Clark, 1959), 87-88.

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2 I request the reader’s patience regarding a distinction I use throughout this paper, between Asians and Asian Americans. By Asian, I mean first generation immigrants from Asia; by Asian American, I mean the children of Asians, and hence second, third, fourth, etc., generation Asian Americans. This is a crude distinction to be sure, far less precise than the suggestion that a recent immigrant isn’t American and hence the concomitant implication that America is not entirely constituted by immigrants. Of course first generation Asians are just as “American” as ninth generation Asian Americans. I simply use the heuristic of “Asian” and “Asian American” throughout in order to name what I perceive to be the cultural distinctions between generations. As I characterize at different points in this paper, these distinctions come into play, co-evolution, so on and so forth. Most specifically, I make a distinction, that I believe while rudimentary helpfully, between “Asian churches” and “Asian American churches” and here I deploy my “Asian” and “Asian American” distinction for the sake of describing different modes of Christian and ecclesial life.

3 It is through the past that we see God in the future. It is by remembering the scriptural claim of God’s word to the Hebrews, “Of all the peoples of the Earth, I have called you Israel to be my people” (e.g., Deut. 32:8) that the Gentile church can be certain that the same God who has now called them will be with them in the day of St. Paul’s eschatological vision of the church and Christ in heaven (1 Thes. 4; it is in the past that we see God being faithful to the Jews even in their darkest hours. And it was by remembering that past that the earliest Christians remembered that God too would be faithful to them in their impending dark hours. I suppose that God could have chosen some other means by which to remind us of his faithfulness, could have chosen something other than time by which to bless our lives in time, but as God created us temporal creatures, it is through and in time that the God of time has come to us. God has made it that the past serves as the lens through which we see God in the present and in the future. We understand from our medieval theological heritage that God is timeless and eternal in time, but we also know from the tradition that though God has no time in him, he, out of love for us his faithful creatures is eternally present to time through the incarnation of the Word and the ongoing presence of the Holy Spirit. For the Christian church, there can be no future without its past. See, for example, Thomas Aquinas, Summa Theologiae, II.110.2, II.111.1. Karl Barth, Church Dogmatics, III.1: The Doctrine of God (London & New York: T & T Clark, 1959), 87-88.

4 Hannah Arendt, Between Past and Future. Eight Exercises in Political Thought (New York: Pantheon, 1998), 348. On the question of difference and assimilation, see Arendt’s elaboration of “the particular” and “the universal” in Human Rights (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1973) and also her The Origins of Totalitarianism, 56-68.
logical tradition; without theology, it surrenders its past as a common language. It’s this triple deprecation that worries me. Without the past, we Asian American Christians are headed into a future of our own choosing, having left so much behind, we lack going on well. Let me explain what I mean by 1) An Over Against, 2) A Leaving behind, and 3) A Separation from.

AN OVER AGAINST

To be American is to be racialized. To come to America then is to enter into the peculiarly American experience of racialization, to be understood as a Race American: African American, Mexican American, Asian American. In coming to America, in becoming racialized, one gains an identity inscribed by these racial dynamics as the ultimate ratio (ultimate rationale) of civic life. This is what the Ugandan Priest and theologian Emmanuel Katongole means when he says, "I didn’t know I was Black until I came to America." To be American is to think like a Race American.

In Race America, especially under the auspices of multiculturalism, to be racialized is to be separated into your own group over against other groups. In these groupings, or ghettos, or subcultures, the only thing that substantially holds us together, the only reason we exist as a group, the only thing that makes us unique as a distinct racial community, is that we are not like the others. These groupings are less about what we share in common than about what we don’t share with others. In other words, these various racial groupings have less to do with what you are than what you are not. As a Race American, you know for certain one thing, you are not another kind of Race American. As an Asian American, you know you are not an African American, a white American, or a Mexican American. Now you would be very hard pressed to say what it is that makes you Asian American, but you know for certain, you are not black, Mexican, or white.

Now you may know you are of Chinese descent or that you prefer Korean rice over Vietnamese rice, but none of this is to be Asian American; to be Asian in America is simply to not be something else.

So if to be a Race American is to be over against, then what is “Asian American” over against? Most directly, we are over against Asians. We are ethnically Asian but culturally Asian American and hence define ourselves over against the experiences, histories, cultures, practices, and languages of first generation Asian people. While we are the children of immigrants, we ourselves did not go through the process of immigration. Though we may speak Asian languages, we do not conceptualize the world through those linguistic habits. While we look Asian, we are not Asian in the same way those Asians are Asian. You know the over against posture of Asian Americans by the embarrassment we often feel regarding those who are Asian by way of accent, dress, manners, habits, etc. The whole lexicon of the “FOB. "nomenclature signals this. While I, an Asian American, was born here, you are “fresh off the boat” which explains why you have the accent, dress, manners, language, and habits and I don’t.

But in the same way that Asian Americans are not Asians, we are also not American, at least according to other Americans. Unlike other Americans, we are removed from immigration (and hence Asian nationality) by only one or two short generations. Unlike other Americans, we do not as legitimately belong here. America is not our home, so the argument goes, in the same way that America is
home for the Irish-American. And we are continuously reminded of this. For example, someone may ask us, as they often ask me in the South, "Son, where are you from?" If I say, "California," they say... (Wait for audience to fill in the blank). That's right, "No, where are you really from?" by which they mean from where did I originate. A few years ago, when American Olympian Michelle Kwan was defeated by fellow American ice skater Tara Lipinski, the headlines of one reputable newspaper read, "American beats Kwan." To the extent that "American" looks something like a person of Nordic facial features, then Asians, by physical features, will always be considered outsiders, no matter how many generations we've lived in America. So for Asian Americans, no matter how much we want to be "full-blooded Americans", the racial politics of America don't often allow it. So we are on the one side, over against first generation immigrant Asians, and on the other side, we are over against non-Asian Americans. This dual over against doubly binds us on both sides, framing us into necessarily defining our identity not in terms of what we are, but what we are not.

Asian Americans know they are Asian Americans because they are not white and, they are certainly, in their minds, not black. They are over against whites specifically because while they would like to be white, they cannot be. As well, they are over against blacks specifically because they don't ever want to be black. They want to be white not in the sense of what they consider a cultural blameness but because they too want to live in certain neighborhoods, and have access to certain kinds of jobs and exercise certain kinds of power. As well, they don't want to be black because they fear that the African American has become in America, the pariah, the paragon of what one should not be in becoming racialized; in the same way they want to be white because of what whites have, they fear blacks because of what they do not have. While many Asian American youth may mimic a media perception of African Americans, very few Asian Americans would dare affiliate with the intense racial struggle endemic in black America. We just want to rip them off whenever it's convenient for us. We're ultimately not sure what makes us any different from them, but for certain we know that they are not us. In this way, Asian American racialized life is but a microcosm of racialized life in America, where difference as a problem becomes the animating question of the civic nation. Hence, W.E.B. DuBois talked about a "double consciousness" that meant he as a black man understood his very existence as that of a problem.9

In his magnificently written history of immigration and what we call the "alchemy of race," Yale historian Matthew Frye Jacobson describes the 20th century in terms of two simultaneous racial developments. Prior to the 20th century, there had been a ranking of Europeans such that whiteness, and its encodings for power and privilege, was reserved for Anglo-Saxons and denoted to the likes of Eastern Europeans or Jews. However, in the 20th century there emerged what Jacobson calls, "multi-ethnic pan-whiteness" that now imagined "whiteness" as inclusive of even the likes of Eastern Europeans and Jews. This "pan-whiteness" did require as a prerequisite that those who desired to be white do two things: first, shed identity markers that were not white (for example, using whitening cosmetics to hide the skin color of Eastern Europeans, or discarding of ethnic Jewish practices and habits); second, perpetuate acts of discrimination against non-whites in order to prove they were white. In other words shedding ethnic identity and committing violence against non-whites purchased one's passage into whiteness.

This led to the second development. At the same moment that this multi-ethnic pan-whiteness came into existence, a new outsider was created: namely, those unable to shed ethnic identity or unwilling to do violence against blacks. The allowance of passage into whiteness simultaneously placed an albatross upon those unable to pass into whiteness. Violence and discrimination against those unable or unwilling to pass into whiteness was now justified on the grounds of that inability or unwillingness.11

I fear that Asian American churches as well are beginning to develop something like these realities. The development of multi-ethnic Pan Asian communities, similar to the development of the multi-ethnic pan-whites, most powerfully articulated in the Pan Asian American church, operates according to the same logic and involves the same kinds of political capital. Asian Americans prove they are Asian Americans over against Asians by shedding Asian markers, for example, by working as hard as possible to shed their accents. The goal here is to free ourselves of anything that marks us as distinctively ethnic persons. I think


10 W.E.B. DuBois, The Souls of Black Folk (New York: Vintage, 1990). Famously, DuBois writes, "Between me and the other world there is ever an unsaid question: unsaid by some through feelings of delicacy, by others through the difficulty of rightly framing it. All, nevertheless, flutter around it. They approach me in a half-hesitant sort of way, eye me curiously or compassionately, and then, instead of saying directly, How does it feel to be a problem?" (Ibid.).

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here of one of my former students, Yen Huong, a young Vietnamese American woman. Recently, Yen changed her first name to Kimberly, because "Yen", she was told over and over again, was hard to pronounce. So now she is Kimberly Huong. Well, Yen, now Kimberly, was also recently engaged, and her fiancé's last name is Dill, and so to her lament she realizes that within a few short years, she will have gone from Yen Huong, a name that is obviously Vietnamese, to Kimberly Dill, a name stymied of any ethnically Asian markers whatsoever.16 Within Jacobson's continuum, that's the first move.

The second move is then to perpetuate violence over against. Hence Asian Americans prove they are Asian Americans by making fun of Asians who cannot but speak with accents.15 For lots of second and third generation Asian Americans, making fun of and mocking first generation Asian immigrants (very often their parents) become a rite of passage of leaving behind Asian-ness and becoming Asian American. I validate my membership within Asian America by disingenuous to non-Asian Americans, which include whites, blacks, Mexicans, etc.14 Let me offer an example. It has become common for Asian Americans to make money by establishing businesses that glean off the surface of the urban poor, using their desperation for profit, while rarely if ever investing in their local economies or building up their local infrastructures; we make money off them, but we refuse to befriended them; we build our wig shops and liquor stores there but our houses and churches elsewhere.

Jacobson's double move of shedding ethic markers and doing violence is most tragically demonstrated by the forms of violence Asian Americans perpetrate against themselves, against their own bodies in the great pursuit of western conceptions of beauty and sexuality.13 In what has now become standard practices for Asian American women, plastic surgery that sharpens the broad nose, increases the flat chest, or "Americanizes" the Korean eyelid, uses the brutal violence of cosmetic surgery to, combining Jacobson's two moves into one, remove Asian markers by committing violence against Asian identity. Today, plastic surgery has become for Asians what the skin-lightening cosmetic industry was for Eastern Europeans a century ago. If race is only substantiated, if it is made real, by its performances, these are the performances by which Asian Americans become a race.

The Asian American church at its best moments is Christian.18 The rest of the time, Asian American Christians import their racial idioms into their churches, as it were.

13 No text illustrates this with greater insight and clarity than Tony Montana's heartbreaking The Last Exit (New York: Vintage, 2001).

14 In these moments, it celebrates the one Trinitarian God, who with different persons — Father, Son, and Holy Ghost — is one essence and determined by one will and one love. Created in this image, Asian Americans reflect this image. At its best, the Asian American church tries to approximate the pietistic gathering of the waters, first promised in Genesis, commemorated in Acts and fulfilled in Revelation (Genesis 2, Genesis 10, Acts 2, Acts 10). There, in manifold worship together stand every people, nation and tongue from all peoples, all nations and all tongues (Rev 5).

15 At its best, the Asian American church is but one among many gathered around the one gathered body of Christ; we are many parts, but one body, we drink the same cup and eat the same bread. "For Christ's sake I beg you, in his flesh he has made all groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the barrier between those that he might create in himself one new humanity in place of the two, that making peace, and might reconcile both groups to God in one body through the cross, thus putting to death that one against the other ... (Ephesians 2:15-16), if I can be permitted to recite scripture. At its best, the Asian American church, like the church universal, prides in one voice. Difference is no problem for us, rather difference is a reflection of the Trinitarian life in which we participate. Difference is no problem for us because we happen to worship the One who in his own person has pietistically gathered the diverse and the human, the Creator and the created, divinity and humanity so as to reconcile us all to God. And so difference is no problem for us because it is no problem for God and it is no problem for God because God himself is no other against but a brotherhood, both three and one, both human and divine, both difference and identity. We the gathered of God, in our best moments, in our various cultural and linguistic expressions, testify to this gathering of difference, a sharing rather than an other against.

Without a corporate identity of the church as the church, without a vision of reconciliation gathered around the one gathered body of Christ as fully God and fully man, then we are each left to our own devices. This over against will leave us each thinking that we are now left to fend for ourselves, that we are not part of something bigger, which in consequence only inflates our sense of our own uniqueness in our own individual little cells. All of a sudden rather than understandings ourselves as participants in God's on-going covenant of promise as extended from the Jews to the nations, rather than a sense of shared history as a shared storied, we understand ourselves as the church alone. We don't seek to learn and partner with others because we keep forgetting there are others. We don't conglomerate with others because we have learned to understand our identity not as a mutual gathering but as an over against. Over against Asians, with whom we share a past through our histories of immigration, over against other non-Asian American Christians, with whom we share a past because of the commonwealth of Christianity, Hungry for identity and place we leave the one identity and place that might give us a chance. We leave the past and hence give up the future.
their Christianity had nothing to say to their Asian American-ness. In this way, the racial habits of Asian American Christians very often look no different than the racial habits of non-Christian Asian Americans. When this happens we abdicate the message of reconciliation to the violence of Jim Crow. Because we have not shown the world that the church is any better than a series of separate ecclesial water fountains, the world has set up its separate but equal water fountains. Because we are an over against community, the only thing gathered in our churches is us, not them, and certainly not them. Rather than giving away the gospel, we have just given away the gospel. As Augustine says, the violence of the world is our fault, for the world knows nothing better.

The specific problem with this over against mentality is that it segregates Asian American Christians from the universal church. The universal church shares a common past: we the nations have been called into God’s covenant of promise. It is not because we are White, or Asian or Asian Americans that we warrant God’s grace. It is only because God has baptized us into Jesus’ Jewish body that we have been enrolled into a common history all nations now share with Israel. It is, as it were, by faith, and faith as a gift of God.

Without this common past, there can be no future. Any community that defines itself in terms of itself as an over against, as all Race Americans have been forced to do, has no future. Two things will happen, as these two things historically always happen. One, the lack of any constituent reason for being together other than being over against will produce a lack of resources necessary to negotiate our difference in relation to others’ difference; we will turn increasingly internal, becoming so self-interested as to implode upon the decadence of our racial singularity. Or, secondly, we will do what other racialized communities unable to negotiate their difference do; we will turn white, lacking any constituent identity we will long for the only identity that matters in America, the one identity

17 Race in America is one drinking fountain for blacks, one for whites, one for Latinos, one for Asians, so on and so forth. Mind you we are all drinking the same water, and the water does the same thing for our bodies, but either way, for each race, their own drinking fountain. Asian American Christians have swallowed race at such book, line, and stanza. To be sure, Asian Americans have not done so any more than, for example, our Latino brothers and sisters. It does mean, however, that having accepted racialization without ever a wee bit of resistance, we have become constant perpetrators of racial violence and discrimination over against our own Christian brothers and sisters. The separations that mark the various racial communities in America are passed by way of violence, keeping some in by keeping others out.

18 At least this is John Milton’s reading of Augustine. John Milton, Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Socur Raison (Cxford: Blackwell, 199?). Milton understands this book as a rivival telling of Augustine’s City of God.

A LEAVING BEHIND

Helen Lee’s now classic Christianity Today article “The Silent Exodus” portrayed the slow series of events that has left many Asian churches in a lurch between generations—a curse, in some ways, of their successes of raising up subsequent generations of leaders in the rich soil of immigrant America. In the same way that Lee’s article in the 90s wondered whether first generation Asian ministries could effectively develop a second generation of Asian American leadership, so nearly fifteen years later, the question has become where these leaders have ended up. So well have these churches developed these young Christians that they soon outgrew their home congregations. The “Silent Exodus” names the story of how this next generation left their home churches in order to find greener pastures.

Let me offer an example. In one southern American city, a church grew out of a bible study started by Taiwanese immigrants who had come to America to study at a technical university. Feeling like second-class citizens in many of the predominately white churches in the city, they launched out, in search of something of their own. Over the years, the bible study grew into a church that became one of the largest Asian congregations in America. At its heyday the church could boast of a wonderful blend of young and older families, three generations of members, a thriving English Ministry alongside two thriving Chinese-speaking congregations, a multi-person pastoral staff team, and hundreds of committed Christians. Over the years, the children in this church grew into young adults. As the product of the church’s many successes, these young adults would go far away for university to schools like Stanford, Harvard, Carnegie Mellon, the University of Illinois, each an indication of how well these kids had integrated themselves into American society and the kinds of material wealth that church
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had come to expect. More importantly through the first generation’s faithfulness in developing dynamic English speaking ministries the church produced powerful young visionary leaders, who in college found natural homes in groups like InterVarsity, Campus Crusade, and the like.

Though larger than most, this particular church epitomized hundreds of similar Korean, Chinese, Japanese, Filipino, Indian, or Vietnamese churches throughout the United States. Like many other immigrant Asian churches, the young adults that emerged from this church often spoke native languages, enjoyed Asian foods, and tended to hang out with similar looking people. But over time, variations between generations became increasingly evident. Though they spoke native languages, they clearly preferred to express themselves by expressing themselves in English, making it very unlikely they would pass on these languages to their own children. Though they enjoyed Asian food, their tastes both broadened toward pan-Asian cuisines and narrowed in their own ethnic foods i.e. no sea cucumber for this generation of Asian eaters. And though they hung out with other Asians, it was just as likely for them to marry Vietnamese if they were Chinese, Caucasian if they were Japanese or Korean, etc. and so forth, again making it very unlikely that they would share any specific culture enough to pass it on to their own children. Finally, it wasn’t simply their foods or dating tastes that were different, but their views and visions for what Christianity might be like, what discipleship demanded and promised, what studying the Bible meant; the basic sacramental lives of these Asian American Christians looked differently. In a sense, these variations always existed, but growing up highlighted these differences in especially pronounced ways. The successes of this Asian church meant its Asian American children took as seriously their faith as did their Asian parents; they, like the immigrant engineers that were their parents, sought something of their own.

Naturally, as the young adults in our southern Asian church grew up, preferred English, left behind sea cucumber, dated and married outside of their ethnic nationalities, and imagined Christianity differently than their parents, they began to feel less and less at home in what was once their home church. To them, the English ministry began to feel less than foremost to the larger dominant Chinese congregation. Just as their parents had raised them, they refused to accept second-class citizenship in their own faith lives. So what happened? In what has become a paradigmatic description, Lee answers: “a silent exodus of church-raised young people who find their immigrant churches irrelevant, culturally stifling, and ill-equipped to develop them spiritually…” (99). These young adults left, often to find new church homes in culturally sensitive Caucasian churches, sometimes in pan-Asian versions of mega churches, and sometimes no church at all. Today, is there still an English-speaking Asian-American ministry in this predominantly first-generation Asian church? Yes, but most would be hard pressed to explain why, since the folks who attend that ministry feel like strangers to those in the other congregations, often not being able to even speak the same language, much less share in the same visions of Christianity. Indeed, the fastest growing group in this church is not the second generation Asian Americans, but rather the first-generation Indonesian community or the Mandarin speaking congregation.

This story of course can be told innumerable times with as many iterations as there are ethnic Asian churches. In response to the Silent Exodus, Lee fore-shadows the development of pan-Asian churches like David Gibbons’ Newsong and Ken Fong’s Evergreen. These churches followed, and indirectly helped expedite, the Silent Exodus. Lee suggests, rightly I think, that these churches now epitomize the future trajectory of Asian American church life. Indeed, a few years ago, a conference Timothy Yang and I attended featured “the future’s top Asian American ministry leaders;” almost every future leader envisioned a church that looked something like Newsong or Evergreen, even against the warnings of Dave Gibbons and Ken Fong that theirs were specific instances of God’s activity, and not to be taken as molds for every Asian American ministry. Unsurprisingly their caveats were left unheeded because when your church experience looks like a silent exodus, you cannot help but want to emulate the likes of Evergreen and Newsong. Not one future leader I spoke to hoped to join any of the mainline protestant denominations; none described liturgically-shaped and tradition-rich visions of worship; few expressed much hope for reconciliation and growth within their first-generation mother churches. A starting small number could articulate a coherent vision for a multi-ethnic church that was not determined by an ever against approach to non-Asians. All these churches wanted to leave behind and start anew.

I would bet, though I’d be happy to be proven wrong, that in the years since this conference, almost 10 years ago now, the most thriving Asian American churches and congregations have indeed followed suit. And I am guessing these churches have found success because in the same way these future leaders want.
ed something like Evergreen, so the exiles of the Silent Exodus set out to find something like Evergreen. It was natural for these churches to find success since they had positioned themselves in response to the felt needs of these exiles, as surely as those churches failed, these churches succeeded. So a Rousing Success has met the Silent Exodus.

Accordingly, my doubts about the Asian American church's future seems to have run ashore on the success of the Asian American church which seems actually to have quite a bright future, especially if we take the Newswong's and Evergreen's as the barometers of success. This is precisely what has happened in the southern city of the church I have been discussing. The demise of the English Ministry at this particular church mirrored a similar exodus in other Chinese, Korean, and ethnically Asian immigrant churches in this city. As this exodus began taking place and as people began to take notice, concurrently or perhaps consequentially, Asian American churches sprang up, and within a short period of time at least three such churches were growing. Today, these churches have to varying degrees succeeded in recouping these exiles, bringing them home in new homes, just as they left their former homes.

But I would like to take a moment to reflect on this success. And here I should be clear that my critique is only partially a critique of Newswong and Evergreen, for whom I have tremendous respect, and to which I am greatly indebted. My critique is at least partially aimed in the direction of these churches for at least two reasons. First, because these specific churches have had arguably the greatest influence upon the development of the larger Asian American church. Second, because these churches are our future and because they do exemplify the trajectory of Asian American Christianity and as exemplary deserve our sustained attention and consideration. It is to honor not disparage these churches that I offer critique, for it is an indication of how seriously I take these ministries and their leaders. Still, my critique is not aimed only at these churches because I take these churches themselves to be only emblematic of larger concerns confronting all Asian American Christians. In other words, the Newswong's and Evergreen's were not the causes of the Exodus but themselves casualties of it. I tell the story of this southern Asian church in order to offer an example of how these processes were already underway long before Newswong or Evergreen ever showed up. These churches, like many of us, are only doing their best and represent I believe the most hopeful responses we have to the many paradoxes that grip

Asian American Christianity.

My concerns follow what I suggested at the outset of this lecture: can Asian American churches do well considering what they've left behind? If they order their lives by first leaving behind their pasts, what gets lost in the transition? My sense is that these churches and this new generation of Asian American Christian leadership want exodus — to leave their first-generation Asian mother churches — without the many losses of exodus. And this cannot be, for the scriptures tell us that exodus is fraught with loss, tragedy, mourning, and the many casualties of forgetting (Genesis 12:50; Exodus 1:40; Deut. 31:34; 1 & 2 Samuel). I don’t believe Helen Lee’s article had, nor have we, taken full stock of these losses; nor have we adequately thought through their implications. Much of the Old Testament narrative is the on-going question of memory: How well will the second and third generations remember God’s faithfulness to the first generation? If they do not remember, if they choose to forget and leave behind their pasts, it is doubtful they will possess the resources to survive into the future.

What Lee’s article and the notion of the Silent Exodus didn’t theorize, even as it anticipated these new models of ministry, is what gets lost in the process. And I want to argue that what is lost in the Silent Exodus, what the children of exile do not carry forth, is precisely the resources that might otherwise help these congregations know how to be faithful. The tragedy here is two-fold. On the one hand, like prodigal children, upon receiving their inheritance, they quickly left their homes in anticipation of greener pastures (Luke 15).20 Countless shrinking

20 It might be suggested that the progression of Asian American Christianity both from and eventually out of the Asian immigrant church can be interpreted within Old Testament images, especially Abraham’s departure in Genesis 12. However, I would raise an important distinction. The Hebrews essentially came to be in Yahweh’s calling Abraham forth from his motherland to the Promised Land, such that his departure became the mode by which God’s people the Jews came to existence. However, this is radically different than the transition from Asian to Asian American Christianity, where both generations are Christian the transition here is not from non-Christian to Christian but from Asian to Asian American. A more fitting analogy would be the generational developments throughout the rest of Genesis, from Abraham to Isaac to Jacob and then Joseph, a thread I pick up in the next lecture. However, again, a critical difference obtains in that subsequent generations come to be not by leaving the predecessor generation. Indeed, the drama revolves around the tensions of remaining together, most powerfully illustrated by Joseph’s return from forced first choice’s exile and his generosity and reception toward his father and brothers. Joseph was forced out and yet still sought and provided the conditions of reconciliation. If anything, the continuity of Abraham’s lineage suggest Asian American Christians continue, not depart from, the legacy of Asian Immigrant Christianity. In some ways, I suspect they always do, even within these various generations, for in such cases, a greater association with Joseph-like mourning and hope need to proceed within Asian American Christianity. It might also be suggested that to the extent that a “blessing” is given, then the departure of Asian Americans from Asian immigrant churches is not abandonment. I imagine this to be the case at some level, but I do wonder as to what such a blessing would look like and I doubt that such a blessing is often sought on the part of departing Asian Americans.
Asian churches across America testify to this. Rather than engage in the hard work of generational reconciliation, rather than lean into the boundless reservoirs of wisdom these first generation congregations possess, we second and third generation Asian Americans have traded in our unassuming, old-fashioned, behind the times, old-world but faithful Asian church for the boisterous, sexy, loud smash and grab churches of the next generation of Christianity. I will admit, our parents dress poorly; they often speak through thick incomprehensible accents; they lack the requisite sense of humor to understand why Adam Sandler is a funny guy. Having first generation Asian Christians around is not, in other words, effective church growth strategy. To be sure much of the blame can be laid at the feet of the first generation for their unwillingness to accommodate the Spirit’s new work in the next generation. To the extent that the first generation failed to invest fully in its children, its children felt put out enough that they left.

But they could have stayed. They could have struggled the way the church has always struggled from one generation to the next. They could have imagined life not in the terms of America’s rugged individualism but in the terms of the Kingdom, which demands and promises that in the last days, your young women will see visions and your old men will dream dreams, a prophesy itself passed from one generation to the next (Joel 2; Acts 2). That staying rather than leaving is possible is testified by the thousands of Asian American Christians who have decided to stay with, rather than leave behind, their first generation Asian churches, even though those churches are old-fashioned, behind the times, even though the leaders of those churches don’t dress well, don’t laugh at Adam Sandler, and very often do not accommodate the Spirit’s work in the lives of their children. Why have they stayed? I have no idea, but to guess somehow they thought it was the right thing to do. Somehow they believed that while old Asian immigrant Christians were not effective church growth strategies, their lives did have something to say about the goodness of the Gospel.

And this gets to the second part of the double-tragedy. Not only were the mother churches left behind when the second and third generations left, what was also lost was the ability to see that loss. Without a home, one forfeits the horizon by which to judge the road ahead; homeless, you surrender the compass by which to direct your own path. Without a home, you have no alternative but to leave. When you give up the generation that produced you, you also give up the grounds by which you are able to see well, to morally understand what is happening, to pay heed to the realities around you. The reason it was so seemingly easy for the second and third generations to leave their homes was because they did not know what they were doing; for how could they, since in leaving, they left behind their ability to do so. Having literally left their past, they left also their ability to understand the future.

A SEPARATION FROM

One reason we have not taken stock of the losses of the Silent Exodus and their implications for the newly emerging Asian American church is that we feel neither the inclination to do so, nor do we have the resources to know how to take stock even if we wanted to. Instead of those resources, which I call theologi- cal, I see running through these emerging churches the discourse of what the philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre called the “the goods of efficiency,” or put simply, the “how to” guides derived from the importation of business and entrepre- neurial enterprises into ecclesial life.21 Put simply, the operating model of many emerging Asian American churches is the operating model of business.22

This business approach relies on what MacIntyre calls “the goods of efficien- cy” and takes as its primary registers questions bestowed, inherited by, and I’d argue, imposed upon church life as gleaned from the business world i.e. the world of profit, property, and possessions. It’s my observation that market capital- ism is the primary ethos running the Asian American church. To be sure, Chris- tianity has never been completely devoid of the kinds of practical concerns the market deals with on a regular basis. For example, in Acts 6 we see as one of the first official duties of the New Testament church the question of properly apportioning adequate resources for widows of martyrs who have died for the faith. The allocation of deacons for this purpose, then and now, is mutually within the province of church and business. However, I’d say there is a marked difference. In Stephen’s day, the first church leader appointed to allocate the resources for the widows, the goods of efficiency were measured against the goods of faithfulness (appropriated from MacIntyre’s “goods of excellence”). Prior to the onslaught of


22 You’ll find this initially by observing the description I’ve used here, “operating model” and ac- knowledge how much this phrase has taken residence in many Asian American churches where “chief operation’s officer” or “executive pastor” are now familiar parts of the church’s vocabulary.
capitalism, faithfulness measured effectiveness and something effective would be rejected if it were deemed unfaithful. Today, as the discourse of business has become our ruling paradigm, the goods of efficiency have become the goods of faithfulness, so that faithfulness today is almost exclusively measured by effectiveness.23

Within MacIntyre's argument, the church has only two options once it has surrendered the goods of faithfulness to the goods of efficiency: namely, the managerial and the therapeutic. The church becomes a manager of individual desires, optimizing individual lives in order to achieve their own determined ends, and offering therapies when these ends fail to provide the promised happiness. However, as manager and therapist, at no time is the church in a position to challenge, reorder, or reject the ends individuals so choose for themselves. Since the Asian American church understands itself as primarily a manager of individuals, its pastoral task is primarily to assist people in getting what they want, not, as Augustine would say, shape those wants.

I see this everywhere in Asian American Christian life, where the demands and promises of discipleship to the Lordship of Christ have given way to the priority of the self-serving, self-interested, and self-diminishing self. This is not to say that the selves produced in these congregations don't do good things, such as homeless ministries and quiet times. It's more that goods such as homeless ministries and quiet times have been instrumentalized for the self's satisfaction. Of course none of this is unique to the Asian American church, but I would say that Asian American Christians who garner the highest per capita incomes in America through their almost manicjal fixations with higher education are especially vulnerable to conflating the Gospel with the false promises of the American Dream.24 Especially with their difficult histories of immigration and assimilation, Asian Americans, I believe, have a hard time distinguishing discipleship from upward mobility. Their churches, in turn, cannot help but endorse and even encourage this mindset and so cannot help but see themselves as managers and therapists of this mobility.25

Here you see the colluding effects of the losses that accrue with the "leaving behind" and the "over against." Since the Asian American church has torn itself away from its first generation forebears and set itself over and against non-Asian American Christians, it has surrendered its sources of moral deliberation, its traditions of faithfulness, and memories of God's faithfulness; alone and isolated, it has only itself to adjudicate the future. When you have no past by which to make decisions and no other communities by which to interpret the world, then the unknown future determines how you should do things, and hence it will be solely for the sake of the future, namely for the sake of survival of the present into the future, that one has to make decisions.26

This is what happens when the church separates from theology. The incarnational nature of Christian ministry means that context matters. Part of the task of theology is to contextualize context, to situate any particular church in its particular context upon the larger context of God's providential care of history and conversely to contextualize God's providential care of history as what he is doing within any particular church, theology helps us see what we're doing by seeing what God is doing. Without theology, we have no idea what we are doing, what we have done, or what we should do.

I have been told in no uncertain terms that my particular questions as a Christian theologian are simply unhelpful to the current plight of the Asian American church, which requires, according to this opinion, practical not theoretical assistance. Of course I would disagree with the notion that theology is simply a theoretical affair. (Remember that the controversies over orthodoxy in patristic literature were arguments about practical concerns like salvation, worship, and church leadership.) Still the accusation about theory is the suggestion that theology is sequestered in ivory towers, that the only people for whom theology is important are theologians. In contrast, the argument goes, the Asian American church is busy dealing with real matters in the real world. The implication is also


26 In contrast, MacIntyre thinks that moral discernment takes place in continuity with the past, in such a way to be coherent, intelligible, and contiguous with a tradition's ongoing existence in time. One makes decisions as if one was involved in an ongoing conversation, and at that table are treasures old and new, assuming, that is, they are not left behind. This does not mean, for MacIntyre, that nothing new ever happens; but only that the new happens continuously with developments from the past; that is a tradition remains faithful to itself, by retaining a sense of integrity with the best of its history. Without that past, it is not simply that one will make poor decisions, but more deadly, one will make poor decisions without knowing one has made poor decisions. If the future is marked by the concerns of survival, anything becomes acceptable for the sake of survival. One will then separate from all other concerns, especially those considerations that undermine the calculus of efficiency and the formulas for success.


25 Alasdair MacIntyre, After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame
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... doesn't matter, for example, if you get the Trinity right or wrong in thinking through issues like "the flow" of worship or developing a really cool small group ministry.

Such arguments are legitimated, I am told, by the further claim that seminary is the worst place you could go if you want to learn to grow a church, with the obvious implication being that churches don't need theology to be churches and that the kind of theological training one gets from seminary only slows down effective church growth or gets in the way of the emerging church. Better to get an MBA than an MDiv, if you want to be a good pastor, learn counseling, not systematic theology. Like I said, managers and therapists. In response I'd like to say, "Get your Trinity wrong, and you always get your worship and small group ministry wrong; it's just that without theology, it will take you some time to figure that out." 27

Theology is the time God has given the church to talk about God in order that the church would not be ruled by efficiency but worship. From the perspective of efficiency worship must look like a waste of time. From the perspective of theology, worship is what time is for, and only in the context of worship do we theologically understand how to efficiently order our lives, and hence our time, to work for God well. In terms of what we have already discussed, without theology, the Asian American church can't possibly know its racial over against is endangering the gospel. Since the irresponsible and inefable processes of socialization racialize all Americans, without theology, Asian American Christians have no way to recognize or resist its bio-political powers. Likewise, since leaving behind the first generation works, because it's effective, we have no idea what we are doing when we leave other than we know it works. We lack the theological lenses to see how deeply problematic it is; without theology, we lack the conversations that might offer more creative alternatives than leaving. Already positioned over against and leaving behind, separating ourselves from theology allows us to do little work at these critical intersections. 28

27 All these disparagements about seminary and theological questions point to a deep and renewed suspicion on the part of Asian American Christians regarding theology. At some point I don't know what to think of this since I know Asian Americans love higher education. As well, I'm not quite sure if Asian American suspicions about academic theology are any different than the larger suspicion of theology resident in most Evangelicals. Perhaps the Asian American allergy to academic theology is just another instance of Asian American Christianity mimicking white Christianity.

28 In contrast, while white Christianity is equally evangelical and equally hesitant about theology, still, inhabiting the white and Evangelical Christian tradition, it can't help but run into these source...

... it has very little interest in Asian Americans. Simply put, the current state of the Christian academy considers the Asian American church irrelevant. This is counterposed to secular academic interest on the topic of Asian Americans, finding there a dynamic and fascinating ethnography of realities, which have vast implications, warranting serious academic research and investigation. The Christian academy, by which I mean seminaries and confession graduate programs in religion, in contrast, has little to no interest in the topic of Asian American Christianity.

Because of a worrisome binary that has fixed American race relations to a black/white distinction, all else is rendered invisible, as if the only thing that matters is how white people relate to black people. On this binary, Asian American Christians have a choice between those two options. The binary of white/black Christianity of course is determined by the primacy of whiteness, which leaves black Christianity simply derivative of a prior and more essential whiteness Christianity. It is no wonder that within this binary, Asian American churches have overwhelming-ly, I'd even venture to say totally, chosen the white option. Academic theology has chosen to align itself with white Christianity — vis-à-vis European and Anglophone theology — and every once in a while, though always with the greatest wariness, black theology. There is simply no room when white theology hogs the show, leaving almost no space for anyone else except some marginalized version of black theology. 29 In tomorrow's talk I will suggest that the emergence onto...

29 Because Asian Americans situate themselves over against Asian immigrants, then the valuable
this stage of a generative Asian American theology has the potential to open the doors and recast how this stage is set. For now, it’s enough to say that from the perspective of the overwhelmingly white Christian academy, Asian American Christianity doesn’t matter. Neither black nor white, both victims and victimizers of racism, not Asian and not fully American, Asian Americans are simply ignored. They are rendered invisible by the registers of contemporary theology.

The problem with the Christian academy not caring about Asian American churches is that such a lack of regard leaves those churches increasingly vulnerable to any discourse that will grant it attention. If the discourses that are interested in and interesting to Asian American churches is on the one hand increasingly secular racial politics and on the other unapologetically parasitic business practices then the Christian academy estrands the Asian American church to its death. This state of affairs is deeply problematic on ethical grounds if we remember that Asian Americans are increasingly filling the seats of America’s best seminaries. From Princeton to Trinity Evangelical Divinity School to Fuller Theological Seminary, Asian Americans are paying lots of money — or borrowing lots of money — in order to be trained by the Christian academy. They pay for this education, imbibe the lessons of these teachers, master these materials, embrace this tradition, learn these languages all the while they’re refused even an ounce of help in how to contextualize this education for the unique circumstances of Asian American Christianity.

The great 20th century theologian Karl Barth famously suggested the task of theology be undertaken with the Bible in one hand and a newspaper in the other. The world around us, Barth was asserting, really matters. And yet, seminary professors often teach and write as if the world doesn’t matter, as if Princeton and the Korean American church don’t share a common destiny through the Reformed tradition, as if thousands of Chinese American Christians don’t look to TEDS for a coherent biblical hermeneutics, as if Fuller were not located in the most Asian place in the world outside of Asia. Talking about his experience at Fuller, one Korean American tells a story that characterizes the world around us:

I was dating a Filipina for a while but was counseled by a Korean pastor that I could not have a non-Korean marriage because of my ministry. My

resources of liberation theology hold little value for them, because from the perspective of the Asian American, liberation theology spirals from, of and to an entirely foreign context.

Fuller professor told me that I should stay with my girlfriend. Perhaps that in the larger picture, this advice from the professor was right. However, I had no go-between as I heard two opposing views; I was in a context where two cultures were clashing. I needed a cultural translator. Fuller was a very formative time for me, as it is for a lot of people. In those crucial times, I wish that someone would have understood my context.

This is a regrettable state of affairs if only for the erroneous epistemological suggestion that truth can be truth without being incarnated. It is almost as if these institutions and the teachers that only see white people when they see Asian American people. One Asian American woman stated, "I had no mentors at Fuller, which was a very hard thing for me to deal with. I wanted to challenge the assumptions of my culture with the gospel. Yet, no one could understand me at Fuller, so it was very difficult." 30

Here we see a parallel to my earlier criticisms about businesses that take from the disenfranchised without investing in their infrastructures. If theology understands itself, as it has to in order to be faithful, as a servant of the church, it must divest its vast stores of goods for the benefit of its churches. If it does not, it will only have perpetuated a self-fulfilling prophecy by assuming the Asian American church politically irrelevant. This is happening to the great detriment of Asian American Christians desperate for help and to the great shame of academic theology, which will cease to be theology and simply be academic.

This lecturership and the recent efforts of President Mouw and the Fuller community are important steps in the right direction, as are professors and centers in Asian American Christianity at places like PTS or American Baptist Seminary of the West. But still, we have a long way to go. What Asian American Christians so desperately need are courses for their contexts, including classes that dare to question their contexts, professors from and with interests in the Asian American church (hint, hint) — and the academy’s encouragement that such scholar- ship count as “scholarly” —, classroom discussions that, as Pastor Wing Pang suggests, “theologize the Asian American context,” academic centers that act as intersections between church and academy, bridging the academic and the

30 In contrast, consider the remarks of then Fuller professor Milburn Voll in the opening pages of Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996), 13-16. Voll specifically names the contexts of post 9/11 Los Angeles, besieged Sarajevo, and the intellectual atmosphere of Potomac. My sense is that traveling, which has marked Voll’s career, forces greater awareness of context. Without traveling, context becomes less visible.
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ministerial, and research projects and publications that help the whole church, not just its Asian Americans, think through these complex issues. In other words, what the Asian American Christian needs is what every Christian needs, and they need for others to see they need it. If not, Asian American doubts that seminars and theologians have nothing worth considering will only continue. If not, the past, which is our theological inheritance, will be lost, leaving behind an ability to continue faithfully into the future.

CONCLUSION

Hopefully I have shown why the over against has no future, why the leaving behind has no future, why the separation from has no future, and why these dynamics bode ill for the future of the Asian American church. It is the collective consequences of these three departures from the past that worries me most. I fear that they are contributing to an interwoven deterioration of the basic constitution necessary for any Christian community to remain Christian. It is the combining of these three departures from the past that I see as slowly eroding our future, as slowly chipping away at the great gift that is the Asian American church.

1 I realize that dubbing Asian Americans "Yellow" is hardly inclusive, for it does not capture the diversity of our Asian American brothers and sisters, which to be sure include many of those too often left out of "Yellow" or "Asian American": South Asians, Pacific Islanders, under-represented Asian minorities such as the Hmong, etc. Still, I also think that trying to include everyone is diametrically ambiguous, exactly to the extent that diversity by its nature slips the reins of total indistinguishability. I use "Yellow" in a purposefully limited way here, as a rhetorical device that seeks to narrate my experience with Americans of Japanese, Chinese, Japanese, Korean, and Vietnamese (and to a lesser degree Filipino and Cambodian) descent, discomfited to a politically sanitized whiteness and blackness that currently dominates the methodological landscape. I could qualify this as an assault of a "Yellow" to include others, but doing so would only exclude yet other while prolonging the obvious limits of my experience and scholarship as well as the narrow aims of this essay.

narrative. The issue is that the Crow have lost the context with which they were asked to tell their story. This is a real loss of point of view. For the Crow, history and tradition are not just the storyline of the past, but part of who they are and how they understand their present. By changing the way the story is told, we change the way the Crow see themselves and their place in the world.

I want to emphasize that the Crow are not just a group of people with a story to tell. They are a community with a culture, a way of life, and a set of values that are integral to their identity. By ignoring the context of the Crow's story, we are denying them the opportunity to tell their own story in their own words.

This is not just an issue of storytelling. It is an issue of identity and authenticity. The Crow have a right to tell their story in a way that is meaningful to them. By not allowing them to do so, we are stripping them of a fundamental aspect of their culture.

I want to end with a quote from the Crow scholar Andrew Egan: "The Crow are not just a group of people with a history. They are a community with a culture, a way of life, and a set of values that are integral to their identity. By not allowing them to tell their story in a way that is meaningful to them, we are denying them the opportunity to express who they are and what they stand for."
HOLDING IT TOGETHER

The tragedy of the Asian American Christian over against, leaving behind, and separation from that I outlined yesterday is that it need not be this way. Though our community sits on a fault-line of tectonic contradictions (we are Asian American but not Asian; we are Asian American but not American; we are neither black nor white; we are the children of our parents, but we are not our parents; we are victims and we are victimizers; we are inheritors of a discursive tradition that sounds to us like a foreign language; so on and so forth), still, there is a way to hold it altogether. Or let me rephrase that: there must be a way to hold it altogether, for what other options have we? The impossible possibility of cultural devastation? Abdicating the many good graces that God created when God created Asian American Christianity? True, the dangers facing Asian American Christianity are formidable, but for us, no more formidable than the great calling that marks our lives as Christian: to be in but not of the world (John 17). Faithfulness to this is our great task, in a way that makes mere survival not nearly the triumph Lear asserts, who seems to think survival for the Crow people, rather than faithfulness to a way of life, is all that matters. For Christians, survival is not our task, but faithfulness, even such that death — as the martyrs remind us — is sometimes our greatest faithfulness.

The future of the Asian American church is the future of the Christian church in America, and I would argue, the future of America. For in our future stands the fate of every community that struggles between the impossible possibility of cultural death and the equally impossible possibility of cultural faithfulness. In the future of Asian American Christianity sits the future of Christianity in this land, the ability to hold together the many complexes of our lives on the pilgrimage from the earthly city to the heavenly city. We must hold it together, because we have to. We can hold it together because the One who calls us to be in but not of the world was himself in but not of the world, and hence is able to bring to completion our great task.

This morning I juxtapose yesterday's over against, leaving behind, and separation from with holding together. Rather than over against, good moral traditions hold together the multiple allegiances that always constitute identity. In some sense, identity is nothing other than this holding together; especially within the context of late modernity, there are few identities that are not some amalgam between multiple traditions, narratives and visions of the good. Rather than leaving behind, good traditions always hold together several generations at once as they journey between past and future; it is only the most deceived tradition that believes it has somehow transcended its past. Rather than separation from, good moral traditions lean into the past, learning from the vast stores of its discursive history in order to see rightly the challenges of the future; members of good traditions do not fear but indeed welcome past discourses as a conversation about them, a conversation that can't go on without them.

It is by tending the past that Asian American Christianity will find itself productive of the most amazing new possibilities. Returning to Hannah Arendt, it is precisely in the fragile moment between past and future that the generative processes of thought and action emerge onto the world-stage. Rather than a future set over against a discarded past or one undercut by infinite repetition, the church exists in the Spirit-created silver in between. In this holy space between what God has done and what God will do, the Asian American church gathers the fragments of its memories and through the courage of hope patches together a quilted future. It is hard work because it is delicate work, and the pieces that comprise our future are none other than the remains of God's infinite presence that can never be contained and so surges forward, creating a future as the moreness of that presence. Those who dare minister in God's church require what the Psalmist calls "skillful hands and integrity of heart" because the past as living memory arrives as living flesh (Psalm 78:72). These cherished ones are indeed treasures hidden in earthen vessels and must be handled with care for they memorialize the Three-In-One God of eternity as also the post-present-future God of time (2 Cor. 4:7-18). Here is the most innovative Asian American ministers flourish because they grow in the same rich soil where the Incarnate Word...
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pitched a tent and lived among us (John 1:14); here innovations follow course in continuity with that which came before; here the new self shows as honor of the old. The genuinely new holds together. Describing how Newsong has held together continuity and innovation, past and future, Pastor Dave Gibbons writes:

"We're different but not entirely new. Our prayer is that we always show a difference and humility to the previous generations. To be "new" is not the goal but to be Christ-like and adaptive to the Spirit's movements within the myriads of subcultures in a given context. We're firm believers in the movements of embrace as espoused by theologian Miroslav Volf. This embrace is even of our past."

By tending a common history, and the God common to that history, do Christians come to find that they are gathered around one body as one body. Without that shared history, these other communities cannot help but appear as competitors within the cultural logic of capitalism. Gathered around the one body made available not through competition but offered as gift, the basic economies of these previously rival communities are transformed into a mutual sharing; through this sharing, the respective Christian communities each face different challenges but share a common inheritance through which to negotiate both these challenges and one another at the intersections of these challenges.

The sacramental shape of Christian existence between baptism and the Lord's Supper introduces and instantiates into the world a politics called church by which Asians and Asian Americans, Asian Americans and all Race Americans, and generations across generations share a common life within God's infinite generosity and eternal accommodation. Since God is eternal, there is space within God's life for all these. As the Lutheran theologian Robert Jenson says, "God can,

7 Pastor Dave elaborates on Newsong's ongoing relationship with its predecessor Asian immigrant churches. "We have been a church for about 30 of the top Korean first genera-

8 Robert Jenson, Systematic Theology Volume 1: The Triune God (Oxford, UK: Oxford University

9 For my critique of multiculturalism, see Jonathan Tim, "The Limits of Franz Baju' Multicultural-

10 Augustinian of Hippo, The City of God against the Pagan (Edinburgh: Cambridge


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Other not as strangers in competition for limited resources, but as gifts of a gracious God, then we will already have discovered ourselves within a new imagination, on the road to a new and revolutionary future, which worship both signals and embodies* (81). In other words, holding it all together is, for Christians, worship.

AT THE BORDERLANDS OF ASIAN AMERICA

In preparation for these lectures, I sent a good friend a draft in order to get some feedback. Roger grew up in a first generation Chinese church, left for some time and later returned to another Chinese church with a bucking English ministry. As well, he is a veteran team leader of a para-church ministry that serves Asian Americans, and while the ministry is ethnic specific, it prides itself on being open to anyone; in other words, even though his ministry is ethnic-specific, he does not consider it over against. In response to my first lecture, Roger wrote,

I have to say that as an Asian American attending an Asian church with a struggling young adult group, I felt like I was on the defensive for most of the first lecture. You say strong things, and I know you mean to (and often they are quite good points), but at times I felt like your criticisms were harsh and unfair. ... The entire time I read this lecture, I wondered, "Where do you see yourself in this discussion?"

I imagine these words reflect the feelings many Asian Americans might have upon hearing yesterday's lecture. It is not my intention to put people on the defensive, though it is also not my intention to make concessions to avoid that. I have often wondered why it was that Dr. Hertig and the leadership of this symposium invited me of all people to be the keynote speaker for this conference. If I had to guess, it might be my forthrightness and willingness to say things in a way that is forthrightly un-Asian American. In other words, given all the work they were putting into getting everyone together, I'm certain they wanted someone interesting and they must have known that as a student of Stanley Hauerwas, I would rather be interesting than right, better to be wrong than boring. So it was for your entertainment that they brought me, and I hope I have at least been entertaining, if not always, or even often, right. But I suspect that there is a deeper reason they brought me here to be with you. I suspect that they see in me Asian American Christianity. Not in the sense that I represent its bright future, for certainly people like Roger do that a whole lot better, but that I represent Asian American Christianity with all of its wrought contradictions, mourning and tragedy, all of its attempts to hold together its over against, leaving behind, and separation from. I imagine they invited me to be the speaker for this historic moment for Asian American Christianity because I embody (however unflatteringly) its story.

I live at the borderlands. I mean this more than in the sense that I live in central Texas, which from the perspective of you provincial Southern Californians probably seems like the borderland between madness and civilisation, between good and evil. I live where Asian Americans live, at the borderlands, between belonging and not belonging, between home and exile, between Asia and America. I, like many of you, became a Christian in a first generation Asian church. I like many of you no longer attend that church. For nine years, I was involved with InterVarsity Christian Fellowship, four of those years as a student leader, five on staff. Over those years, I saw the fellowship, and hence its character, become increasingly Asian American as the second and third generation showed up on campus and claimed their birthright. Like many of you, I fell in love with Asian America, largely because I identified with it, understood its passions, struggles, questions and desires as my own. In Asian America I found a home. If I had stayed in California, I have little doubt that I would have made my home there, taking up residence in a second and third Asian American church and taking in all that is Asian America in Southern California.

But for many reasons, my wife, Carrie, and I left, and found ourselves at all places in North Carolina where there are less Asians than squirrels. I was among those three Asian Americans in three years of seminary. I remember how thrilled I was whenever I passed one of these other Asian folks in the halls, so happy to see someone who looked like me. It didn't matter that I didn't know their names; I felt immediately at home with them. Transient my whole life, I did in North Carolina and later in central Texas what I've always done, make do, hold it together. We made friends with mostly non-Asians, forged for good Asian food, attended white and black churches, and wondered constantly where and what home was.

As an Asian intellectual, I never struggled with what Cornel West describes as the black intellectual's dilemma;12 never worried to what extent my scholarship either appropriately addressed or sufficiently transcended my ethnicity as an...

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Asian American Christian academic, for I worried neither about “my career” nor about my Asian American identity regarding my career. As the last thing Dr. Hau-erwas told me before I left grad school, “Jonathan, never be afraid to be your- self.” And I knew without doubt, my self is Asian American Christian. Though I am one of two minorities in an overwhelmingly white male department, I have never hesitated to remind my colleagues, lest they forget, that I am not white and have fought hard for the cause of diversity on the faculty. Once, I began the first day of a new class with the assurance to my students, “Don’t worry, I speak English.” I could tell by the amount of laughter, they had wondered whether I could speak English.

As confidently as I have tried to position myself in my largely white world, I have often felt great loneliness, longing for a place called home. In a very white part of the country, in a very white job where I read white theologians and teach white students while surrounded by white colleagues, often times living in inten- tional Christian communities with white people, and playing basketball with white guys, attending a white church where I can sometimes feel like a white religion, I have sometimes asked myself, “Am I turning white?” I hope not. I hope that I am turning these white places yellow. But unmistakably there is a longing for some- thing that is not over against, something that is not a leaving behind, something that is not separated from what feels like a big part of who I am. In my world, I imagine everyone else feels more at home than I do.13 I assume that everyone else doesn’t feel a stranger in a strange land as do Carrie and I, and as I sense my children increasingly will. Is what I long for to be surrounded by Asian Americans the way I am surrounded by white folks?

In some ways, sure. In the same ways that many of our very good friends are Asian Americans from other parts of the country, we long to live in those parts of the U.S. In the same way that we used to be affirmed and encouraged in Asian churches and esteemed as Asian leaders and mentors, we long for a place where we don’t have to prove ourselves given white people’s low expectations of Asian American Christians. To the extent that in Waco people believe Asian equals Chinese, I would love to live in places like Southern California where there is not only a diversity of ethnicities, but as importantly, a diversity of ways of being Asian American. And certainly to the extent that I think some of the most interesting and amazing things happening in American Christianity are happening in churches like NewSong and Evergreen, I would love to be a part of those church communities.14 And yes in the ways in which according to Texans, good Asian food is constituted by a buffet and cellophone wrapped almond cookies, I would love to live near a Sam Woo.

These are longings and fears and hurts that you as an Asian American can only know if you’ve lived in a place like Waco. These are the longings nurtured by a childhood lived outside the ambit of American Christianity, of a biting loneliness of growing up without Asian friends, with the deep scars of racism, an adolescence that was saved from itself only when at age 16 I first stepped into the world-affirming world of the Chinese Baptist Church of Orange County and discovered Asian America and Christianity in the same moment.

And so those who wonder where I see myself given the critiques I freely level against Asian American Christianity should have no doubt, I am Asian American through and through and understand as well as any in this room what it means to stand between and between Asia and America.15 And I celebrate through and

13 For example, as I was completing final revisions for these lectures, I felt compelled to submit the following editorial to Baylor’s student newspaper:

I am assuming that the Lariat staff sees potential advertisements for messages that would be offensive to the Baylor community or detrimental to Baylor’s Christian mission. In other words, it would not knowingly post an ad that, for example, makes racially belittling jokes or openly promotes racism. Either the staff allowed one to slip by, or (more frighteningly) simply did not consider Asians and Asian American on this campus worthy of such protections, since the Lariat posted an ad on Thursday, October 29 that was offensive, belittling, and probably ap- palled “Christian” Students who read the ad.

14 I would restate it differently than Womak from Waco, in Austin, TX has stated, Pastor Gideon Bang has developed one of the most unique young Asian American churches in the nation. See www.womax.com. Gideon, like many of our young Asian American pastors, possesses an impressive array of skills and passions. For a time, alongside partner Vernon Lee, he took over preaching duties at Waco Movement Baptist Church when his good friend Pastor Kyle Luke passed away unexpectedly. UBSC is internationally known for featuring the Dave Crowder Band, which demonstrates the range of Gideon’s gifts and appeal.

15 I bow to this phrase from Peter C. Phan, “Nakasaat and Retainers: Doing Theology with Memory and Imagination” in Journey at the Margin: Toward Autobiographical Theology in American-Asian Perspective, ed. Peter C. Phan and Jiang Young Lee, 11-128 (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1999). Also see the splendid collection of essays, Realizing the America of Our Hearts:
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As I finish being Asian American and will fiercely defend its goodness and integrity, so if defending my very identity. My critique is but a vigorous defense of what I consider the extraordinary gift of Asian American Christianity, and, to quote Amy Tan, "it may look worthless, but it comes from afar, and carries with it all my good intentions." 14 I, like many of you in this room, am Asian American Christianity. We are its desires, its hopes and frustrations, its paradoxes and failures, its exodus and its homecoming. God created us Asian American just as God made us Christian. Our Christianity reminds us of the goodness of being Asian American, and being Asian American reminds us what it means to be Christian, to be between homes, to be strangers in strange lands, betwixt and between, holding it together, pilgrims on the way somewhere.

IMMIGRATION AS PILGRIMAGE

As I was saying yesterday, Asian Americans have been quick, too quick, to relinquish their identity with Asian immigrants. Yesterday I talked about the consequences that had for our relationships with our Asian immigrant forebears, regarding the racial modes of violence we enact against Asians and sometimes even against our own bodies. This violence is part of becoming American, since becoming American has come to mean passing into whiteness by shedding certain things. I also said this was framed by a second bind, that while we so desperately want to be American, America will not allow it, seeing us as outsiders. Asian Americans enact the violence necessary to be American, but are considered forever foreigners within America. 15 In this way, the Asian American is neither Asian nor American. She sits at the border between, forever leaving Asia and forever arriving in America, not allowed home in either place. This is the state of pilgrimage.

As lamentable as this position may be, I believe it has the potential to be the future of Christianity in America. The betwixt and between status of Asian Americans—that they have both left homes and yet are still not at home, that they hold simultaneously two identities at once, that their allegiances are constantly contested, that they are seen by the world, as Michelle Kwan was seen by that_reputable newspaper, as consummate outsiders—is finally a very good thing. It has the potential to be the future because this betwixt and between status is itself the status of Christianity in America. The Asian American church has the very real ability to remind Christianity it is not at home in America. Rather like Asian immigrants, Christians come from another place and are on their way to another place. Though they live here, this is not their home. They are on their way, pilgrims as it were according to Augustine. We are temporary here, and hence, rather than building homes in America, we like Jesus and Paul after him pitch tents in this place, becoming tent makers in a land through which we are only passing. 16 To be sure, the pilgrim status of the church does not exempt it from political engagement, social concern, and relational commitment, but it does mean that what the church works toward is not directed by the idioms determined by the temporal order but instead an ethnological hope in and patience of the world. Against the now tired charges of sectarianism, pilgrimage maximally affirms the material goodness of the earthly city (in all of its political, social and relational specificity) by calling it to its eternal consummation.

What a thing it would be if upon identifying yourself as American, someone asked you, "but where are you really from?" because the goodness of your life seemed so foreign. Christians in America, like Asian Americans in America, are not home, having left, having immigrated, having been expelled. Like the African American church before it, the Asian American church can challenge the vast cultural accommodation that has become American Christianity. The African American church knows America is not its home, since black people have too often become the "wretched of the earth" (to use Frantz Fanon's phrase) as they are reminded on a daily basis in racist America. And so the African American church has been the on-going proclamation to African Americans that they are not granted full citizenship in America because they are citizens of another country. According to African American folklore, as portrayed beautifully in Toni Morrison's Song of Solomon, at the worst moments of slavery, the African would sprout wings taken away during the middle passage and fly home. 17 Folktales

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17 Frantz Fanon, The Wretched of the Earth (New York: Grove, 2005).

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like this became the living subtext of their stories in the new world.

At its worst, Asian American Christianity sets itself over against, leaves behind, and separates from as part of an ideological attempt to establish a home in America. Tired of longing, fearful of not belonging, humiliated and exiled, they give up the pilgrimage of faithfulness for an accommodation to comfort. They of course are not alone in this; it is America's great pathos to conflate Christianity with security and as Americans, we Asian American Christians are not immune to this. Instead of honoring and protecting the great gift of our wanderings, rather than cherish, celebrate, and even evangelize our exodus, we have set ourselves up in barricaded homes in the manicured suburbs of America's great loneliness. In this we have become white, for the over against, the leaving behind, and the separation from is what you do as you pass into whiteness.

It need not be this way. But in order for it not to be this way, we will have to learn to embrace, not relinquish, our status as outsiders. We Christians will be forever foreigners until we come to that place where "God will be the end of our desires. He will be seen without end, loved without stint, praised without weariness..." to quote City of God.21 Until then, Asian American Christians have the ability to remind the church in America that pilgrimage while difficult can also be life giving. What makes Asian American Christians aliens is not their racial identity finally but their faith, and their racial identity has the ability to inform that faith, to situate it between and between. The Asian American lack of belonging can become an index for Christian lack of belonging.

Here we might begin to see anew the struggles of the first generation church and find in their difficulties a paragon of the Christian life. Here we might take our cues not from the ones that leave, but the ones that stay and fight the good fight until it is finished. Here we begin to lean into the courage of the mutual indwelling, the holding it together, of Asian and Asian American Christian community life. We will have to learn from all those brave souls holding it together. They are over exhausted and under resourced. They rarely make headlines, except as empty churches in the great wake of the Silent Exodus. Their churches are often called "old-school" and "out-dated," even "dying." They feel caught between obedience to one generation and the squeaky-wheel needs of the next. They are regularly punished for their faithfulness, silenced because of their vision.

I think here of all those ever-shrinking youth groups and their tireless leaders. I think of their on-going struggles to create innovative ministries all the while the first-generation Korean pastor can't figure out why the John doesn't show up to 6:00 AM morning prayer every day. Balancing the lives of their youth between overbearing parents and an Imperializing MTV culture, they hold it together if holding it together means the lengths of their efforts. I think of Campus Crusade students who return from schools like Stanford or Harvard, who, by the creativity of their vision, see in their old-school, out-dated, dying churches fertile soil for new things. Bless their hearts, though they have the gifts to lead anywhere, they lead here. They see huge increases every year, as people learn to rethink the workplace or be more accountable with their money. True, few new people ever join these small communities and their numbers remain meager, but then again, who cares when you're seeing this kind of growth? And of course I think of the English pastor, having given everything for a congregation that grows smaller by the week. He realizes that with his entangled commitments to the Vietnamese-speaking congregation he cannot compete with the mega-church down the street. He's okay with that because he knows faithfulness to the gospel is enough to worry about for one day. And so he and all these brave souls go on, holding together what others consider not worth holding together. Here the goods of faithfulness are their own good, reminding us of the end toward which our pilgrimage is directed. Quoting Augustine's City of God again: "Here we shall rest and see, see and love, love and praise. Behold what will be, in the end to which there shall be no end."22

CLAIMING THEOLOGY AS BIRTHRIGHT

In Genesis 27, Jacob steals the blessing Isaac intends for Esau. Unlike God's blessings, Isaac's blessings are finite; there is but one birthright, which Jacob decides to take for himself under the guise of a rather hairy disguise. I think this strange story rings true to the tradition of theology within Christianity. What is different is that the tradition of theology, as it passes through the historical church, is God's gift through the Spirit as the mediator of the revealed word of God. In this way, like the Spirit, it is not finite, and it's issuance, God's giving of blessings, donates a plenitude that cannot be exhausted and hence needs not be fought over; in other words, God's blessing is not scarce and so no competi-

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21 Augustine, City of God, 1179.

22 Ibid., 1180.
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Theology is a birthright the Asian American church must claim. I believe academic theology has the potential, over the next few years, to be the single greatest help to the Asian American church in its mission. The whole enterprise of getting right our speech about God as a form of worship called theology is the inheritance of the Asian American church, which stands within, not outside of, this long line and must receive this tradition and see itself as a critical part of its conversation. If not, it will forfeit a blessing that God makes abundantly available to the church universal. The best theology is dogmatics, worship of God and hence internal to the best practices of the Christian church. And it has to be this language, the language of doxological worship in its specifications as biblical studies, church history, theology, and ethics that must be the language of the Asian American church. This does not mean that this language is the only discourse the church participates in; it is not theological discourse over against business discourse but rather theological discourse as the interpreter of secular discourse, theological language as a middle language between church and world.

Theology is not the exclusive province of white Christianity. No doubt some very important theological developed within the context of white European Christianity, but theology is not white. Theology is not white because God is not white and theology is about God. Nor were our greatest theologians white, and here I mean Justin Martyr and the Cappadocians including Maximus the Confessor, Catherine of Siena and St. Thomas Aquinas, Teresa of Avila, Luther and Calvin and the like. In the same way that these brothers and sisters sit squarely within the tradition of theology, so do Asian Americans. When we do theology we Asian Americans sit at the table with Maximus and Teresa and Luther, we like they are honored guests as we feast together on scripture as revelation of the Triune God.

The tradition of theology is our tradition. We like Esau and Jacob should seek this blessing as if our whole life depends on it, something worth wrestling over; it is God's good gift of God's Spirit in time. Theological language, the church's wonderfully fascinating history, the tools of biblical exegesis, all this should be part of our common language. As we Asian Americans become less ethnically Chinese or Vietnamese, and as we leave Tagalog and Korean behind, we just might find a common language in the language of theology. Better yet to loosen theology from the dominance of white Christianity by learning to read theology in the native languages of Tagalog or Korean, allowing it, as all good theologian need ensue around it. Rather than fought over, theology as a blessing is something that must be passed on and claimed. This passing on and claiming requires both forebears gracious enough to bequeath and recipients grateful enough to inherit. Without this dual activity, blessings go nowhere. In the Esau and Jacob story around Isaac's blessing, clearly something goes wrong in the passing on/receiving and grace/gratitude process.

Something, as well, has gone wrong in the passing on of theology within the contemporary American church such that the suspicions that surround academic theology mirror the suspicions and subterfuge of Jacob and Esau around Isaac's blessing. The church postures itself in a highly defensive relationship to theology, feeling the need to guard its doors against the haters and heretics, seeing theology as fundamentally undermining the very real, very important practical needs of day to day church life. The Christian academy in turn looks askance on the church, with a tendency to discount those real, important, and practical concerns. Much of the conflict centers around the very right concerns of orthodoxy, regarding reading and living around the scriptures faithfully. The church believes it is already doing this such that theology feels like redundant interference. As well, the academy believes orthodoxy is its sole concern and so positions itself superior to the church. Much of this I believe has to do with a gross failure on the part of many theologians in understanding that they work in service to the church. Any theology that does not serve the church in its important, real, and practical concerns is simply not theology.

Despite the many failings of contemporary Christian theology, there is still much that is rich and right about it; there is much about contemporary theology that does indeed see itself as serving the church. Indeed, a quick review of the guild's top journals (Modern Theology, Pro Ecclesia, New Blackfriars, the Journal of the Society of Christian Ethics, etc.) and many of the top publishers of academic theology (Eerdmans, Cascade, Blackwell, SCM, Brazos, IVP, etc.) shows the Christian academy going to great pains to produce scholarship for the church. Unfortunately not all of it escapes the black hole of the incomprehensible or boring, but the effort is there. And then there is much that is very comprehensible and very interesting, written for church congregations invested in the important, real, and practical theological concerns of the church since on their best behavior, theologians are nothing other than church congregants invested in the important, real, and practical concerns of the church.
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ogy should, to be restated and reworked within the local languages to which it, as servant, must answer.23 How wonderful it would be if our congregants were equally familiar with the Christological debates of the fourth and fifth centuries as they are with recent health care debates, as adept with the biblical languages as they are with Spanish and Vietnamese, because as we all know, the Christological debates and the health care debates and the languages of Greek, Spanish, and Vietnamese are all about God. How wonderful if our high school students were as adept in pneumatology as they are in biology. Asian Americans consistently prove themselves as top students in the social sciences, the humanities, and yes, of course the sciences, math, and all those classes that make up the golden path to medical school. Why not theology? English is a foreign language for Asians; theology need not be. Our excellence and competency in theology ought to reflect theology as our inheritance, as we participate as invited guests to this great banquet.24 As Pastor Kevin Dao says, "It feels good just to be included and heard because we have been neglected and ignored until now. I think that it is important that we embrace our identities as Asian Americans and also engage with the larger culture. To do so, we need to have a voice from our context."

One of my friends, Ken, who is a youth pastor here in Southern California, has his middle and high school kids learning theology from day one, has them thinking through doctrine, asks them to invest as ardently in divinity as they already do in AP Calculus and SAT preparation. He takes them seriously by taking seriously that their minds were made for the theological task of loving God.

It strikes me that the Asian American church in Southern California and Fuller Theological Seminary today meet at a critical juncture, "directed toward a future goodness that transcends the current ability to understand what it is," to quote Lear again. The question seems to be whether Fuller can speak the language of theology appropriate to the context of the Asian American church and whether the Asian American church will be able to attend its ears sufficiently to hear. "The future goodness" of the Asian American church’s faithfulness “transcends” their individual abilities, but together, Fuller and these churches give each other their best shot.


Until this happens at places like Fuller or Trinity or Gordon Conwell, seminary professors will go on doing what they have always done: see white people when they see Asian Americans, and they will continue to teach Asian Americans as if their uniquely created identities and contexts do not matter, and then they will always see Asian Americans and Asian American churches as just lesser versions of white Christianity. If this continues to happen, and if we Asian Americans keep getting trained like white Christians and white ministers, then our ministers will always be merely lesser, ripped-off copies of white Christianity. This will not only be a curse to us, but a curse to white Christianity, which needs its non-white brothers and sisters to intervene on its hegemony; just as the worst thing we can do is to allow Asian American Christianity to wallow in the supremacy of white Christianity, so the worst thing we can do is leave white Christians to wallow in the supremacy of white Christianity. As soon as Asian Christianity steps up and claims its birthright, the sooner theology in this country will begin to move away from its white center. White Christianity and white theology will be made yellow, and its mystic purity and its political capital will give way to humble service in the church. In this way is Asian American Christianity the future, because, like it’s black and Latino sisters and brothers, it has the potential to drastically change the landscape of contemporary Christian theology.

YELLOW CHRISTIANITY

Let me conclude these lectures with some remarks on color. The ascension of the Asian American church and the development of its distinct voice and vision can be thought of as a declension of white Christianity, just as the color yellow might be considered a substrate of the color white — less pure, a lesser primary; yellow can look like a dirty white. In this way, Asian American Christianity has resembled a second-order white Christianity. And in many ways Asian American Christianity has been a yellowish adaptation of white Christianity, taking its cues from white churches and denominations, looking to white preachers, evangelists, and missionaries for its theological voice, tuning into white worship, turning to white biblical commentators and following in the footsteps of white ministry leaders. None of this is bad, for we share the one body of Christ. But this becomes bad when that body gets construed as white, which it often has for Asian American Christianity. Asian American Christians in this way are different than their Asian American sisters and brothers. African American Christianity historically developed on its own terms, since European missionaries did not designate
Africa a place worthy of evangelization, choosing instead to enslave Africans. Nor did the African American church in America receive the resources of white Christianity, because white churches were historically unwilling to share the blessings of Christianity with their enslaved or segregated fellow Christians. In this way, black Christianity largely developed on its own, developing its own theology, its own worship and preaching styles, its own visions of God and leadership, so on and so forth. Black Christianity is no lesser version of white Christianity. It is as authentically Christian as white Christianity; no more contextualized, no less symmetrical. In this way, it is both a challenge and a gift to white Christianity.

I believe Asian American Christianity can so be a gift to its other Christian brothers and sisters. I see Asian American Christianity not as a lesser version of Christianity but just plain ol’ Christianity. It is one version of Christianity among others. As such, it has the remarkable ability to deeply influence. Specifically in relation to white Christianity, Asian American Christianity has the potential not of being a tainted shade of white Christianity, but indeed of making white Christianity something else entirely. Asian American Christianity can make white Christianity yellow. The ascension of Asian American Christianity, like the development of the black church before and the Latino church alongside, can upset the logic of white purity, infusing into the whiteness of American Christianity hues and flavors and textures that will leave American Christianity a truer reflection of America, and a truer reflection of Christianity. The yellowing effect will transform Christianity because it will allow the church to more fully enter into the fullness of God’s gathered body, which is not yellow or white or black, but indeed yellow and white and black, holding together that which only God’s church can hold together.26

25 Westrop D. Jordan, The White Man’s Burden: Historical Origins of Racism in the United States (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1976). 11. According to Jordan, evangelizing the Africans would first require seeing them as worthy of salvation, a notion Europeans could ill afford if they were to endure them. Also see Albert J. Raboteau, Calvin’s Body: A Religious History of African Americans (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001). 26. I am indebted to the following people for reviewing and commenting upon drafts of these lectures: Young Lee Hertig, Jonathan Wu, Roger Lam, Carrie Tran, Michael Tal, Lindsay Cleveland, Jerry Park, Mario Cheung, and Ken Hsu.
The little that I’ve shared about myself directly relates to the two themes that emerged for me in Dr. Tran’s talk. In the section titled “An Over Against”, Dr. Tran states:

“This over against will leave us each thinking that we are now left to fend for ourselves, that we are not part of something bigger, which in consequence only inflates our sense of our own bigness in our own individual big heads. We don’t seek to learn and partner with others because we keep forgetting there are others. We don’t commingle with others because we have learned to understand our identity not as a mutual gathering but an over against.”

Here, I understood Dr. Tran to be talking about AA churches in the context of a society that segregates rather than communes and integrates.

I would like to offer a reframing of this isolated, insular image of the AA church. The perhaps unintended function, but profound benefit, which I believe is an example of God’s faithfulness, of the AA Christian church for first generation immigrants is to provide a place of healing and belonging in addition to spiritual nourishment. For example, I have never attended a Korean church that did not serve potluck at the end of every service. During potluck, people are at once physically and emotionally fed and church life comes alive. This church life provides opportunities for congregants to participate in community life in a way that they do not otherwise experience. So many of our immigrant parents gave up their status when they came to America. Physicians became liquor storeowners and those who once wore suits became the ones who dry-cleaned others’ suits. It is in the church that members have status as elders and deacons and for many, it is one of the only places where they have a sense of place, dignity, and respect.

The Korean church that I grew up in was more than a place of worship for my family. Beyond being a spiritual home, it was our extended family and a place of belonging amidst the psychological homelessness that plagued our immigrant parents as well as many of their peers. It was one of the only places in our family life where there was a profound sense of solidarity and connection that in many ways provided healing for the feelings of displacement and loneliness that was so common for immigrants like my parents. I’m reminded of the phrase, la cultura: the curing culture. This refers to more than healing rituals and traditions that are embedded in one’s culture. More importantly, in my mind, it refers to the healing and curing that comes from simply being among your own and having a sense of belonging and connection in your own culture. This is not to imply that church merely functions as a social club or community center. At the center of it all, the Gospel and all the ministries of the church should, of course, flow from the central truth of the Gospel.

This reframe, if you will, is important to keep in mind if we want to talk about a way to preserve AA churches in a meaningful way. We need to acknowledge and understand the multiple values within the AA church, namely: the value of intergenerational reconciliation and healing, the value of spiritual nurturance, the value of preserving and passing down traditions, and the value of providing cultural solidarity. Here, we can honor both the value of the AA church as cultural safe haven of the first generation congregants while exploring ways to make the church meaningful and positive for subsequent generations as well.

Now I would like to move onto the second issue which, for me, relates directly to my own faith journey. A significant issue that Dr. Tran touches upon, that I believe deserves further exploration, is the extent to which the phenomenon that Dr. Tran observes in the AA church parallel current trends in the broader evangelical church, as a marriage and family therapist, I am trained to think contextually and to conceptualize issues in systemic terms. Thus, examining different systems and understanding how they, perhaps, operate in parallel process helps me make sense of the complex dynamics while providing information about how to work with and within those systems.

In the section titled, A Separation From, Dr. Tran talks about the business model of the emerging AA church and the ways in which “AA Christianity mimics White Christianity.” Dr. Tran discusses ways that AA Christianity is in lockstep with the broader evangelical church by, to put it simply, tending to favor innovation over tradition when it comes to modes of worship and ways of doing ministry. The cultural critic and commentator, Ken Meyers, host of the audio journal Mars Hill Audio, has a lot to say about the issue of tradition and history in the church. From the 76th volume released in 2005, he references a number of scholars on this very topic. From the late Collin Gunten, he quotes,

... tradition involves a personal relatedness to others in both past and future time. To deny the salutary character of tradition is to say that we
can only be ourselves by freeing ourselves from others by suppressing the other rather than being set free by them.

Further, he references theologian Steven R. Holmes,

Because of the doctrine of creation, historical locatedness is something good. The tradition we inherit is part of our location in history and so in doing theology it is necessary to relate to the tradition.

And finally, D.H. Williams,

The growing indifference of the free church and especially non-denominational congregations to the founding period of the church’s understanding of orthodox belief threatened to result in growing subjectivism in theology. Bereft of historical points of reference of accommodating the church to a pseudo-Christian culture such that the uniqueness of the Christian identity is quietly and unintentionally traded away in the name of effective ministry.

Here, these scholars were not and are not necessarily talking about the AA church and yet their words and their meanings resonate with Dr. Tran’s critique. First and foremost, it is imperative that we understand the AA church as being located within a larger system that is in parallel process. Perhaps recognizing this parallel is one way to make the AA church relevant to the Christian academy who, according to Dr. Tran, considers the AA church to be irrelevant. It is important to examine the parallels between AA churches and the broader evangelical church in America. We must understand that the AA church is not isolated but rather is connected to the larger evangelical church that is dealing with some of the same challenges of stepping away from its history in an effort to make church relevant to the current generation. In family systems terms, when one part of a system is affected, all other parts are affected, much like a mobile. Thus, we cannot afford to understand our situation and seek out a solution without recognizing the role the AA church plays in the larger evangelical community and vice versa.

In closing, reading through Dr. Tran’s talk and preparing my response conjured up more questions than answers. In what ways are other non-AA churches grap-
Response to Jonathan Tran

BY CHARLENE JIN LEE
SAN FRANCISCO THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

I wish to respond to this morning’s lecture by offering limited explorations on two concerns: the first one, Dr. Tran’s concern about a lack of a generative Asian American theology; a second concern that I see as missing but needful in this discussion, a gender analysis of an emerging Asian American theology.

Dr. Tran posits that the future of Asian American Christianity rests on the Asian American church’s readiness to claim her theological agency. The church’s readiness to articulate her particular understanding of God revealed in the record of Scripture, to describe her experience of God dwelling among the often schizophrenic self- and political- identities — floating somewhere between belonging and exclusion; readiness to illumine a prophetic imagination of God whose vastness sustains humility in all theological articulations. Claiming this theological agency as a church connected to a complicated slice of the human community we’ve named Asian American, means to take a seat at the table of theological discourse and to announce a theology.

It has been long recognized — at least I hope I am right about this assessment — that it is presumptuous to speak of Theology (with a capital “T”), as if there were only one, as if there were a canon of orthodoxy that prescribed how human persons are to know God.1 It has almost become cliche to talk about the relationship between one’s locus theologicus and one’s beliefs about God; to talk about how the place from which we read the world affects how we read the Word. Yet, I am suspicious that in some ways these ideas of the multi-sitedness of theology have been nothing more than an exercise in cordial welcome of diversity. Christian theological discourse at large has and has had at its center a canon of theory, described by western — namely European, namely White,

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Response #2: Response to Jonathan Tran

to our presence and to our voice. I think we have named and described our marginality for a long time. I am anxious to see us move from a descriptive theology to a constructive theology that debunks the mistaken assumptions about the seating assignments and invites others to a kind of theologizing that is marked by a posture of humility and gratitude. Precisely the kind of theologizing that does not rely on an over and against paradigm.

Perhaps, what we need is a theological Copernican revolution: to realize that we do not exist as an accessory orbiting around this Theology (with a capital "T"), but that all theologies (born out of the stories of all people spoken in language that seems "non-theological") and all people are actually orbiting as the misshapen planets around the true center: God. And perhaps, this more accurate rearrangement of the theological landscape is the constructive hope we can offer to those at the center and to those struggling at the margins in the present paradigm.

Indeed, if we truly embraced the "homo-nymy" of God, we can be generous with one another, and we can take the risk of maintaining each of our assertions as provisional to the extent that someone else, theologizing from a different place may offer an insightful understanding of God's vastness that we could never know or imagine from where we are.

I wish to respond now with my preliminary reading of this lecture, as a North American woman of Korean heritage.

Dr. Tran, I also know a little bit about living in the borderlands. Like those whom you praise for returning to their roots, to the ethnic church of their parents, I have stuck it out in the first generation immigrant church. When I first entered ministry, I was determined to learn the story of my cultural faith heritage. I served on a staff of 30 pastors, of whom only 3 were women. Yes, I had to wake up while it was still dark and cold to make it to early morning services, and yes, I had to sit in very long staff meetings where the senior pastor spoke most of its duration. However, I gained from there the color of my spirituality and learned the faith language of Christ's body converged with the Korean culture. Yet, there were parameters set for the shape of my ministry. I could not envision fully becoming and growing within the confines of an overly genderized church culture. At staff gatherings, my seat was assigned with the pastors' wives and with the other three female pastors. You will be proud that I stayed, that I have served in variations of these arrangements in other first generation and second generation congregations in the different regions of the United States that my
bodilyness of your pastoral staff, of your sessions, your elders, your leaders? Are you prepared to widen the circle of your Theology and open the invisible gates in your churches to invite unintended, complex voices that might disturb and make messy whatever neat categories you’ve knowingly or unknowingly established? I hope to hear a resounding “yes!” someday; I will joyfully return to take my seat at the table beside you, sharing your humility and gratitude, and together stand in awe at the roomy-ness of Grace.

Texas rushes over to shake my hand, and with her bright and hard fuschia acrylic nails digging into my small hands, says: “Why, I think it is just wonderful that you’ve learned to speak English without an accent!” Like so many of you, I live in the borderlands.

Yearning to find stable place, to be understood, to belong, yet always knowing that I will never quite belong fully. Yet, I choose not to defer to a center that seeks to assign me my place, but to constructively be me — growing in and out of my awkwardness and gaining strength to my voice. Realizing that, while I don’t know how to hold it together, I am being held together.

I offer a tiny glimpse into my personal narrative to ask all of you, now charged with the responsibility to claim your theological agency as the Asian American church, and to ask our speaker to consider who is at your table? The table where this contextual, constructive, beautiful Asian American theology will emerge and flourish? If it is to be contextual, constructive, and beautiful, it must take the risk of inviting threatening bodies who will slow down the process by asking new questions, uncomfortable questions, and problematize whatever picture you had of an emerging Asian American theology. Are you willing to see and to loosen the rigid structures of your Theology that inform the polity and ethos of your churches? Are you willing to imagine God and to speak and teach of God as beyond male? And to image the ministry of God and theological agency entrusted to all made in God’s image? Are you prepared to critically examine the male-

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 RESPONSE #3

Response to Miyoung Yoon Hammer and Charlene Jin Lee

BY JONATHAN TRAN
BAYLOR UNIVERSITY

First, many thanks to the panel for what I thought were incisive and beautiful responses and corrections to my lectures. For Professor Yoon Hammer and the first panel, I have no response; for to argue with their comments would be to suggest that somehow they were not absolutely right; as well, to respond at this point would be to suggest that this is about who's right and who's wrong instead of engendering a certain kind of conversation. So I am grateful for the care of the panel's important arguments, especially the way Professor Yoon Hammer attends to the critical modes of healing made possible by Asian and Asian American churches. Just as Rev. Dr. Michael Lee rightly pointed to a lacuna within my lectures, so she filled out that glaring void by describing the crucial role social gatherings play in the life of immigrant and minority Americans. As well, I am grateful for the narrative she offers of her own faith life and the ways it highlights the vitality of traditional liturgies for the formation of theological character and imagination.

I would like to respond to Professor Jin Lee's comments as they raise issues that my lectures inadequately addressed and hence show an important failing on my part. We are indebted to Professor Jin Lee for reminding us of the central place gender must take if these conversations are to go forward in a productive, and as she says constructive, manner. As I said last night, the Holy Spirit is God's imagination poured out on the earth (following John Milbank), and it is by God's Spirit that the future is made available by the Spirit's aeration of time, by opening fissures in our closures, fragments in our totalities, a way forward amidst our various disjunctions. I believe that for the Asian American church the question of difference opens at the site of gender identity, equity, and formation. I think God is very interested in how the Asian American church will respond to these questions.

Professor Jin Lee duly states that my words become "overbearing" to the extent that my admonitions that Asian American churches retain fidelity to the first generation does not pay heed to the plight of Asian American women in
these churches. As she relates her own pilgrimage she describes how her at-
ttempt to hold together generations resulted in first generation Korean Christians
assigning her to child care and spousal support, this despite her academic and
ministerial training, and I would argue, clear brilliance as minister, teacher and
theologian.

Here, I should take a moment to clarify a point my lectures failed to make
explicit, a point that many of the panelists picked up on. I am not saying that it is
unfaithful for Asian American Christians to leave first generation immigrant
Asian churches in order to start second and third generation Asian American churches
like Newsong or Evergreen. I am not saying it is wrong to leave. I am not saying
that faithfulness demands one stick it out no matter the circumstances. I need
to be clear here because, as many of you who have suffered this can attest,
these questions are not simply academic. Hence, I am not suggesting leaving is
unfaithful. I am suggesting that leaving may be unfaithful. I am not suggesting
that one must stay. I am suggesting that one can stay. For me the problem is not
leaving, but rather the suggestion that leaving is our only option. Rather than
sacrificing ourselves on the horns of staying or leaving, I want to resist choosing
between those two as if we have no other choices. If we parse the issue as if leav-
ing means innovation and staying means faithfulness, we ignore the ways staying
may indeed be incredibly innovative and leaving mightily faithful. Even though,
as I state in the lectures, leaving often means relinquishing the sources of moral
deliberation, that does not mean that staying necessarily honors the past, for as
many of us know, there are many who stay who in no way honor the past. Like-
wise, there are ways of leaving that do honor the past and do so in unexpected
and innovative ways that speak to, again invoking Lear, “a future goodness that
transcends our current ability to understand.”

By asserting that leaving may be unfaithful, and by showing how that might
be the case, I am trying to interject an intervention, a stopgap if you will, in a
powerful trajectory that asserts leaving as the only option we have. What I am
beseeching is that we take time to consider all the options God, as the Lord of
history, has made presently available to us. As I said in beginning these lectures,
we need to step into the impasse to dream amidst the crushing homogenization
the world of totalitarianism forces upon us. In order to do so, we need to inhabit
God’s temporal loneliness and consider our options, of which “staying” or “leav-
ing” are only two among many others.
and Charledia. And if we need to leave, we had better as well pay attention to the consequences and mourn the absence of reconciliation that often inhibits and encourages leaving. Even if we cannot achieve reconciliation, we need to display the appropriate contrition, and to be sure, contrition doesn’t mean pointing fingers.

I think my restatement only further emphasizes the import of Dr. Jin Lee’s comments. I will confess that as she offered her de/constructive appraisal, I kept thinking to myself, “Oooh, I wish I had said it so well.” In her critical comments, Professor Jin Lee states that my lectures would have her return to the oppressive environment that would crush the many gifts she and many other Asian American women embody and offer. Yet as I have just tried to clarify, I am not trying to castigate her to the silence such churches often impose. I am asking all of us to imagine the relationship between first generation Asian immigrant churches and Asian American Christians — a relationship played out at critical junctures like gender — beyond the narrow axis of leaving or staying. If we remain beholden to those bewitching linguistic habits, we will continue to, as Wittgenstein notes, bang our heads against the fly bottle.

Professor Jin Lee perspicaciously and powerfully relates how leaving the first generation Korean church freed her to faithfully live into her calling as minister and professor. Another way of underscoring that is to remind ourselves that if she did not leave, we may not have her tremendous and tremendously efficacious presence before us today. Yet, how do we pay witness to the goodness of that departure without disparaging the goodness of the many women who stay? How do we describe honestly the injustice of the church’s gendered presumptions about spousal support and childcare without besmirching the great and powerful vocations of spousal support and childcare? In order to do these well, we will need to move beyond the paradigm that suggest leaving is our only option. If we do not, we will not be able to portray those women who stay as somehow second-class women, a portrayal I believe, and I imagine Dr. Jin Lee believes, not only dishonors many of our mothers, wives, sisters, and daughters, but as well dishonors Christ whose sacrificial death reveals the servant nature of God, rendering spousal support and childcare the upshot of Christian discipleship and hence the vocations of all Christians.

Professor Jin Lee is absolutely right that my lectures inappropriately articulated these kinds of realities and hence became oppressive and overbearing. For that I apologize. It is inexplicable omission, for which I feel (the right kind of) shame. Thank you for naming my blindness; I consider your insight and admonition a great gift, as I am profoundly susceptible to the very closures I am trying to describe. I mourn the reality that many churches and Christians, including many in this room, cannot honor your ministry and your many gifts, and I apologize for the ways my lectures have deepened that dishonor.

I do believe that the oppression of women in the first generation Asian church is cause for leaving. Unfortunately, I don’t imagine that is often named as a reason for leaving by those who leave, who tend to repeat these dishonors in innovative new ways. But I also do not think that such oppression means we must leave, and if we do leave, in leaving we need to take stock of what we are leaving and grieve those losses, which would include damning those first generation congregations to their patriarchy. It is true that in staying, it is highly unlikely first generation churches will witness and cultivate the broad array of gifts women bring to the table; yet it is equally true that in leaving, in taking those gifts out of the sightlines of those churches, it is equally unlikely they will ever see them. I believe that honoring the past that makes our lives possible, and the past that makes the future possible, requires us attend to these kinds of realities and expand the range of options God makes infinitely available to us.


2 Once again, the thought of Hannah Arendt provokes instruction. For Arendt, the plurality of action requires the continuous renewal of promise and forgiveness. Sayyid Iqbal’s reading here is especially apropos: “The inescapable and inexplicable insists here: human affairs yield certain consequences: first, in acting there is always a necessary disjunction between intention and consequence. Not only are our actions always open to the reading and misreading of others, but also because of this already existing web of human relationships, with its inescapable, conflicting wills and intentions... action almost never achieves its purpose” (161, p. 190). Second, action is intemned in this medium of stories or "proseax", or naturally as its fabrication products tangible things (190, p. 190). Actions are identified by their doers as well as by the spectators and those who suffer their consequences through various narrative tellings, and in this way they become part of the web of human affairs: "I thought I was being generous," I say, whereas you thought I was being overbearing and protective... Such is the web of narratives within which human affairs unfold." Sayyid Iqbal, "The Reluctant Modernism of Hannah Arendt (Oxford: Rowman & Littlefield, 2003, 113.

3 Many thanks to both Professors Yoon Hammer and Jin Lee for permission to include their remarks here and for continuing conversations.