

# **A Response to Wonsuk Ma's "Toward an Asian Pentecostal Theology"**

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[[HTTP://www.aps.edu/ajps/99-1/99-1-r-gabriel.htm](http://www.aps.edu/ajps/99-1/99-1-r-gabriel.htm)]

While introducing the paper Wonsuk Ma points out that Asian Evangelical theology is still in its formative stage, and hence there are many unanswered questions. His purpose of doing this paper is to probe the possibility of doing theology from an Asian Pentecostal perspective - highlighting the value it would have in the context of a broader Asian Evangelical theology. It will also serve to enlighten Asian Pentecostal thinkers concerning their unique capability and calling to engage in theological reflections within their context; and then to communicate their reflections in relevant ways to Asian recipients.

He begins by defining theology in a simple way to suit his purposes in the paper, and then goes on to elaborate on the elements that are involved in doing theology and the emphasis placed on the different elements in different theological formulations. He wraps up each of his three main sections on theology with his suggestion of the ideal model. However, in the last section on Asian Pentecostal theology, which is the main thrust of the paper, he prefixes the elements of, and the emphasis in an Asian Pentecostal theology with briefings on the distinctives of an Asian Pentecostal theology (the need for an APT, the significance, and the ecumenical possibilities in an APT). His conclusion is brief, revisiting his purpose statement at the beginning of the paper.

In this paper, I would like to discuss several important issues arising out of Ma's paper.

## **Starting Point of the Theological Process**

Immediately after giving his definition of theology he says "the (theological) process can begin from either end: divine truth or human needs." There is no problem with the first end, but it is the latter that raises questions. If human need by itself should start off the theological process it could then mean that it is human need that validates contemplation of God. Which is to say, if you have a need, you get a glimpse of God corresponding to your need. If your need is political liberation you see God in Scripture as a political liberator, and His work running through Scripture as political liberation. Logically, this should also mean that if there is no felt human need, there is no need for God either, or for contemplation of Him. If this point is taken to its end, such a premise for doing theology could also lead to the undoing of all theology - by questioning the very existence of God.

But this is not to be. It is not human beings and their need that validate God, rather it is vice versa. It is God who validated human life by putting His image therein, and by

expressing serious concern for human need through out salvation history. In fact at a later stage in the paper Ma rightly holds liberal theology responsible for making human need the indispensable starting point for doing theology. The process of all theological reflections I believe should rightly begin not from any one of the two ends, but rather with a combination of both ends.

## **The Revelation of God**

### **2.1 A basic confusion concerning revelation**

It seems to me that Ma confuses the biblical understanding of the revelation of God. He says God reveals Himself and His will through His words, which includes Scripture and experiences (not necessarily the experiences limited to the select history of biblical times, for he specifically adds that these experiences are contemporary). Then, he again adds that God also reveals Himself and His will through salvation history, which Ma limits to the history of Israel (p.17).

I am quite surprised that Ma *equates* experiences with scripture to speak of both as the agencies through which God reveals Himself and His will to us. It is not just Scripture that is God's word to us, but also our experiences are His word. This belief is not exclusive to Ma. Many from among us Pentecostals would agree with Ma concerning this. What it does however is that it raises questions on the sufficiency of the Bible and of the Lord Jesus Christ as revealed in the Bible for faith and practice today.

I suggest that our experiences are not revelations of God and His will, but rather actualization of the revelation of God and His will as found between the covers of the Bible. Our experiences are not authentic in themselves. They are authenticated in reference to the objective standard of God's word. God's word as His revelation along with the historic Christ of the Bible, always occupies the highest place as the standard for any type of Christian enlightenment. If experiences and contemporary events are also the revelation of God, then one may ask if there is any limit to such revelation. If listening to God's voice is by listening to the voices of people and of the world, as some streams of theology would desire to impress upon us, then what about the conflicting and confusing messages we may hear? Should our theological process be all-inclusive? The welcome rediscovery of the exercise of spiritual gifts and ministries in this century has brought with it its own problems. God still speaks through prophecies, words of wisdom, even dreams, and visions, as He did in biblical days. But how are we to know that "thus says the Lord" is truly the voice of God? How can we be sure that a vision is really from God and that we have got the right interpretation? After all, it is quite possible for two people to have "messages from God" which contradict each other. How do we know which one to follow? We also believe that God speaks to our hearts directly through His Holy Spirit. But recognizing the voice of the Spirit is itself not always easy because there are other deceptive voices which sound like the voice of the Spirit. It is hence that John warns us in 1 John 4:1 to test the spirits and make sure that they are truly from God. God does speak to us in many ways and through many people, but none of these are sufficient to know God on its own. There is too great a risk of error. We can very easily and too frequently

mistake the voice of the Holy Spirit. Our feelings and reasoning can lead us astray. And that is why God has given us the Bible. Only there do we have something that is fixed, something outside of ourselves, that is not subject to the changing fashions and pressures of each generation. The Bible provides the basis from which we can assess all other ideas, teachings and experiences.

## **2.2 Finality of Christ**

I would have liked Ma to make at least a reference to the final and most perfect revelation of God, namely the Lord Jesus Christ, the very embodiment of God. The writer of Hebrews begins his epistle with the words, "In the past God spoke to our ancestors through the prophets many times and in many different ways. But now in these last days God has spoken to us through His Son" (1:1, 2a). The Son reflects the glory of God and shows exactly what God is like. He holds everything together with His powerful word (3a, b). There is much theology that claims to base itself on scripture but subtly omits the historic Jesus of scripture. In such a context, it is essential for all evangelical and Pentecostal theological formulations to treat the historic Jesus as the focal point of God's revelation on which any Christian theological process should be based. No study of the revelation of God is complete without mentioning God's revelation of Himself and His will through His Son.

## **2.3 A Misplaced Motif in the Doing of Contextual Theology in Asia.**

My final comment for this section is that Ma's second venue of God's revelation is a duplication of the first. The first venue, he says, is scripture, experiences and contemporary events. The second is the history of Israel as salvation history. I cannot see why God's choice of Abraham and the Israelite nation should be treated as a separate revelatory category apart from or in spite of scripture as a whole. This all the more should not be done in a paper that leads towards an Asian Pentecostal theology where proper relevance is sought for all the peoples of Asia. Most modern indigenous Asian theologies as well as theologies from other continents have kept the implications of God's choice of Israel to the minimum and have instead highlighted God's love for all the peoples of the world to generate required relevance of theology to the context.

# **FORMULATING AN Asian Pentecostal Theology - Flaws and Omissions**

Wonsuk Ma categorizes the composite issues of an APT quite well in the final section of the paper, just before the conclusion. But there are flaws and omissions in his perception of Pentecostalism, Pentecostal theology and even other mainline churches which I seek to address under this point.

## **3.1 Contextual Issues - Spiritism Alone?**

When it comes to contextual issues which an APT will need to address, and will find parallels to amongst the Asian people, it is only the issue of spiritism that stands out. *Because he sees just one relevant contextual issue, the human element (i.e., the context) does not contribute much to the making of his APT.* This failure makes him rely heavily on the past contributions of Pentecostalism, four of which he brings out quite well in the section on theological significance, to develop his APT. I suggest that Pentecostalism historically has made invaluable contributions that can be categorized in the human element (context), which bears close affinity to the Asian context and hence must be an indispensable part of an APT.

### **3.2 Essence of Early Pentecostalism**

Pentecostalism began as a counter-culture movement in the context of an established and structured Christianity. The first Pentecostal churches suffered at the hands of mainline Christian denominations. Their people comprised the poor, the uneducated, those from the margins of society, and the oppressed - in contrast to the rich, the influential and the powerful who occupied the pews of main line churches. The hostility these Pentecostal churches faced from established Christendom and the outside world made them look up with even greater earnestness; thereby enhancing their own spirituality, their spiritual equipment for service, their zeal to suffer for God and their hope in an imminent future with God.

They indeed did perceive the eschatological significance of the baptism in the Holy Spirit. The latter rain was anticipated with eagerness and when it came it was welcomed with ecstasy. But it was not the end. All this was a preparation for an even greater reality to come - the rapture. These suffering churches which bore the brunt of opposition to their surging ahead with their distinctives were convinced that the rain of the Holy Spirit came down upon them not to give them a utopic life here, but to draw them even more close to God and prepare them for His service - therein preparing people for the eschatological hope (the rapture). This was the essence of Pentecostal theology known to the early Pentecostals.

### **3.3 Deviations of Modern Pentecostalism**

Today's Pentecostalism goes with the early Pentecostal churches on the same route till the latter rain - but then takes a deviation that betrays erstwhile Pentecostal convictions and goals. Today's Pentecostalism depends on God for the latter rain but its motives are suspect. The latter rain is not sought to prepare it for the life ahead, but to serve the interests of this life, here and now. This has come to be the one point program of most Pentecostal philosophy and work today. The reason for this is probably that the Pentecostal church today as a whole largely lacks the will to suffer, to lead a simple life, to practice self-denial and sacrificial service for God, and to forsake all worldly pleasures, which were the outstanding qualities of Pentecostalism in the early times. The church that once dared to be hated from all quarters now has the uncontrollable desire to be loved, making it the most trendy church for modern-day times. Ma too notes this

tendency of Pentecostalism to crave for acceptance, but he identifies the problem only partially. Says he,

... one laments the evangelicalization of Pentecostalism in recent years... the movement of Pentecostal groups towards the evangelical churches brought the long-awaited recognition, as a "decent" Christian group. *However this coupled with other factors has caused the Pentecostals to be less appreciative of their distinctives, and consequently to lose some of them* (p. 38, italics are mine).

### **3.4 Waning Away of Eschatological Emphasis**

Wonsuk Ma says the emphasis on the eschatological hope in Asian Pentecostalism waned away because it did not correspond to the needs of the context. I wish to disagree. When Pentecostalism came to India, it came with the message of the imminent return of the Lord Jesus Christ and the eschatological hope. The call to self-denial, simplicity, forsaking of worldly pleasures and zealous service for God were all enthusiastically made in the backdrop of the conviction concerning Jesus Christ's soon return and the rapture. If this emphasis has receded today it is not so much because of Asia's peculiar circumstances as Ma suggests, but rather because of Asian Pentecostalism's tendency to uncritically ape Western Pentecostalism. I concede here that David Yonggi Cho whose case Ma has taken to illustrate his point might be an exception to the rule. I am unable to comment on his work for not being sufficiently informed concerning the features of his work.

### **3.5 Faith of Our Pioneers**

Pentecostal theology has the tendency to occupy itself with the divine element (i.e., pneumatology). To develop a sensitive, relevant and effective APT it is necessary to revisit the human element (i.e., the context) which is - the early Pentecostals themselves. They were people of color, the poor, the uneducated, the oppressed and despised in society. The early Pentecostal churches were suffering churches. This dimension of early Pentecostal life is totally neglected in today's Pentecostal theology. This may not be that relevant for a Pentecostal theology in a rich and prosperous West, but in a poor and miserable Asia this aspect of historic Pentecostal reality when brought out through an APT will reveal the very heart of God to a people in need.

Ma does speak of human suffering in Asia but he speaks of it being caused by hostile spiritual forces for which the Holy Spirit is the antidote. While this is true and should become part of an APT, we must take care not to keep repeating the mistake of living and doing theology in a "spirit world." While it is necessary to know and to assert that Satan is active and he is the prince of the air, we must stop short of suggesting that he is hence also in our non-Christian neighbor's tea cup. This is where APT needs to be more human. It is human to suffer; it is human to experience pain; it is human to be despised, forsaken and oppressed. This was what our own forefathers and mothers in the Pentecostal faith went through, and this is what most of the people of Asia go through even today. Their

predicament prepared them to know God and His power like no one else could. And this is the offer of an APT to the Asian people. They can be overcomers by the person and the power of God's Holy Spirit. Says Ma,

... the significance of the Pentecostal message can best be preserved and enhanced, only when Pentecostals remain truthful to their distinct beliefs and practices. This should be preached in the pulpit, not for the sake of the distinctive, but for the maximum contribution to the church at large and for the blessing of the people (p. 38).

I wholeheartedly agree with Ma. It is necessary for Pentecostal theology to take back Pentecostals to their roots and therein set an example to the whole church and also to the rest of the world, of what true life in the Spirit is. The theology of the poor, theology of the *Minjung*, Dalit theology, theology of the suffering God and His suffering people - all these in their essence portray the experiences of the early fathers of the Pentecostal movement. These issues are now being raised by Roman Catholic and Ecumenical theologians, to our shame; and should I say the reason is because the trend in Pentecostalism today is to see its own distinctives as instruments that will bring success, popularity and prosperity.

### **3.6 Pentecostal Theology of Worship**

An APT should also explore on some other characteristics of Pentecostalism that have not received due recognition hitherto. These would have very close relevance to the Asian context. The special reverence for God (awe and wonder - Acts 2) frequently experienced in Pentecostal worship, and the childlike humility and hungering and thirsting for God seen in Pentecostal spirituality are distinctives that offer immense scope for a Pentecostal theology of worship. They could bring forth invaluable implications for the devotional, attitudinal and practical aspects of theology.

The renewed interest in *rhema* (the spoken word) has a lot of bearing on the revivalistic overtones of contemporary Pentecostalism, especially in the West. It has its own parallels in the Asian context where the spoken word (through pronouncement of curses and blessings) especially when it comes out of the mouth of the elderly or the religious is thought to be consequential. This is another issue which an APT should address.

### **3.7 A Final Plea for Balance and Objectivity**

Finally while doing APT we must take care not to find fault with everything that is not Pentecostal, and to unjustly defend everything that we believe is Pentecostal. In his fourth theological contribution of Pentecostalism Ma says "high" or "decent" worship has fostered the distancing of God from the people. Pentecostalism narrowed the gap between God and people. I am not sure if this is true. Proper rules, orders, words etc., I believe, expressed the lofty intents of the heart concerning God, and not necessarily the distancing of God from people. I do not think Ma is fair enough when he says the experiential expectation full of emotion is non-existent in churches preceding the 20th century Pentecostal church. Without that there could not have been a living church, and without

an emotional experience of God there could not have been its rich outpourings in liturgy, Christian art and architecture, theology, hymns and songs and collective worship. The difference probably was that they were not as expressively emotional as we Pentecostal worshippers today are. The reasons for the difference are as non-theological as they are theological. Western society of the Victorian era has tended largely to be orderly, systematic, lofty in its ideals and emotionally self-restrictive. These characteristics quite naturally permeated into the practice of religion. In recent times however due to big sociological, political and ideological changes (e.g., the French Revolution, the American Civil War, the two world wars, the American counter-revolution of the 60s etc.), the change in the pace of life, the mounting pressures of living etc., orderliness, restrictive behavior and emotional control have slowly been waning away. The "in thing" now is to get on to the bandwagon of that which is "happening." This changed scenario has also crept into the church with sweeping changes in worship, liturgy, authority and many other aspects of church life.

What distances people from God is not emotionally self-restrictive worship, but ritualistic religion. Much prior to the event of Pentecost came Jesus' teaching of God as Father (Abba) which endeared the crowds and the disciples to Him and to the Father, and which simultaneously became a thorn in the flesh for the marauders of ritualistic religion, the priests and the Pharisees. Keeping God distant from people helped them because they could then assert their authority over people and exploit them. Jesus broke these shackles by encouraging the people to think of God as Father. So, the core of the message of Jesus is human experience of the Father's love which bears the foundational liberative dimension for all people. The baptism in the Holy Spirit is a subsequent experience which adds to the liberative experience. Ritualism by the way could creep even into Pentecostalism and distance God from the people, and that is a danger we must be aware of and guard ourselves against.

## **Concluding Remarks**

Wonsuk Ma's paper deals mostly with the framework for theology, with emphasis on an APT. He does bring out some exclusive features of a Pentecostal theology now and then, but fails to do a systematic elaboration of them (briefly), which I think for a paper of this nature is essential. On the whole, the paper does serve the one purpose the author had in mind - that of motivating fellow Pentecostals to endeavor to work towards the doing of Asian Pentecostal theologies.