

Proposed Theological Framework for Asian Lutheranism¹

With Some Thoughts on Lutheran Identity and Its Mission

Naozumi Eto *

We are the children of history, the 2000 years of the Christian church, and 500 years of the Lutheran church after the Reformation. At the same time, we are living here in Asia now at the threshold of the third millennium. These two aspects are the factors we must think of when we discuss Asian Lutheranism today.

As children of Christian and Lutheran history, we become aware of the undeniable fact that we Asian Lutherans owe so much, in almost every aspect of the church life to our fathers and mothers, forefathers and foremothers in the West. What we have in the church, i.e., confessions, liturgy, theology, principles of interpreting the Bible, church polity, and so on are what we have inherited from our missionaries and their sending churches.

Teaching of Justification as Lutheran Distinctiveness

One hundred and twenty years ago when American Lutheran missionaries started mission and evangelism in Japan, they published a

series of books or booklets translated into Japanese right after the opening of mission work in 1893. The Bible and the hymnbook were already available in Japanese, which had been prepared by the missionaries of other denominations who had started mission work thirty years earlier. The list of publication of the Lutherans includes the liturgy of Eucharist, *Small Catechism*, worship book, and *Augsburg Confession* in the first six years. This clearly shows their strong belief that introducing the Gospel or Christianity meant introducing Lutheranism. No doubt about that! And this is very understandable. The *Small Catechism* and the *Augsburg Confession* are the core texts of Lutheranism since the Reformation, and worship and liturgy expresses with words and order the essence of Christian faith and theology interpreted under the light of Lutheran tradition. It was their *raison d'être* for being a Lutheran missionary and Lutheran church. I assume that those were the general characteristics of the work of mission and evangelism commonly shared among Lutheran churches in Asia. Churches of the Reformed tradition would start with the *Heidelberg Confession* and the Roman Catholic church with *Catholic Catechism* and their mass book.

* 江藤, 直純

Japan Lutheran College and Theological Seminary

I don't mean to deny or criticize this mission strategy. Rather, it was necessary to do so. The Lutheran church and its mission work without Lutheran distinctiveness or identity would be nothing. Lutheran Confessions together with their faith and theology should be transmitted and accepted (*traditio*) from generation to generation, and from church to church. The doctrine of justification and the teachings of *sola gratia* or "grace alone" and *sola fide* or "faith alone" do cause the troubled soul to be filled with the joy and peace of salvation from sin and liberation from the bondage of slavery.

But it was true for Luther the monk, and is still true for those who are suffering from the threat of what is called "work righteousness" or the burden of the "law" which should be fulfilled by a seeker of God's righteousness. I do believe this teaching is the core of the Gospel which the Bible witnesses to and the church proclaims to them.

I also believe that this proclamation might even shake the soul of the listeners who have never suffered from serious existential or religious questions of life and death, and evoke a serious quest for salvation when they hear it. If we use the concept of Paul Tillich, this type of theology must be called "kerygmatic theology" in contrast to "apologetic theology". The former is applied to Karl Barth's theology and the latter to Tillich's.

We Lutherans are not Barthians in general. But as Barth starts all theological enterprises with God's revelation revealed in Jesus Christ, we Lutherans also starts with the ultimate teaching of "justification by grace through faith". Even if Lutherans keep teaching the doctrine of justification single-mindedly, this marvelous good news may not appear to be very important to the soul of the people who have not suffered

from the burden of the conscience.

Apologetic Theology and the Asian Quest

Here I would like to present two other theological approaches to reach the hearts and souls of the people in Asia who are new to Christian belief. One is, unlike the kerygmatic theology represented by Karl Barth, the apologetic theology of Paul Tillich. The term "apologetic" has nothing to do with making excuse for or developing a theological explanation or vindication of the validity of the essential message of Luther's faith and theology. That was the teaching of justification by grace alone through faith alone overcoming the time and space between Luther and those of us in the 21st century Asia.

The "apologetic" approach is an approach starting from below, or from our existential concern which cannot help but seek the answer very earnestly. For Luther, the matter of God's righteousness is the most urgent and most serious quest first as an Augustinian monk, then as a student of the Bible, especially of the Old Testament, and as a faithful believer "*coram Deo*" or in the sight of God. For him it was really a matter of life and death. It was not an exaggeration at all. But because it was the most urgent and most serious quest of life and death, the biblical answer of justification by grace alone through faith alone could become the final answer from above.

As the Greek word *apologia* or *apologeomai* contains the meaning of explanation, defense, and apology, the apologetic theology is the authentic theological approach to the heart and soul of contemporary people from below, from their existential quest. Then, we must ask ourselves a question. What is the quest for fellow Asians today, that is as urgent and serious as

the quest regarding God's righteousness for Luther.

As is often said, Asia is a vast continent with ethnic, national, cultural, religious and social diversity. The stage of economic development differs from country to country, from region to region, and from group to group, even in the one and same country or region. Polarization between the rich and the poor, or the haves and have-nots is more serious than before. The spreading of the global economy makes the situation worse. The political situation is also different from group to group. We cannot put all nations in a single bundle called democracy. Military tension in a region and a vicious circle of oppression and violent resistance or "terrorism" are real issues in various parts of Asia. The nomination of a young Pakistani girl named Mahala for the Nobel Peace prize brings the real situation of education for women and children into sharp relief paradoxically, even though she was not chosen as the prize winner. Excessive competitive education and examination does not help grow a sound mind of the youth. Various kinds of minorities such as ethnic minority and sexual minority are suffering from physical and psychological discrimination. Physical and mental health care is a big problem everywhere.

Luther's Understanding of Social Issues

These and other concerns which people have in mind are not simply solved by the teaching of justification by grace through faith. Christian churches including the Lutheran church cannot be indifferent to those social issues, but commit themselves to those issues indeed. What we need is to study and develop the theological foundation for our social commitment.

Before we discuss Luther's theological concepts, i.e., law and Gospel, what is called the two-kingdom theory, or the doctrine of Creation, it is appropriate to confirm his understanding of social issues in close relation with God's concern and commitment.

Now we will look at Luther's understanding of the fourth petition "Give us today our daily bread" from the Lord's Prayer found in his *Large Catechism*. He writes "To put it briefly, this petition includes everything that belongs to our entire life in this world, because it is only for its sake that we need daily bread". He means that this petition "covers all kinds of earthly matters".

That religion has its room in one's interior is a notion which was formed only in the age of Enlightenment. However, God of the Bible is not a God who rules and lives in the human heart and soul only. Rather He is God the Creator of the universe, ruling heaven and earth. He is also God the Redeemer who appeared in Jesus Christ, realizing God's reconciliation with humanity through his death on the cross and resurrection. Finally God is the Sanctifier as the Holy Spirit leading us to the completion at the time of the Eschaton. This God of the Trinity cannot and must not be confined to a small room called the human interior. He is God of our entire life in this world.

Therefore, Luther encourages us to pray in the following manner as found in his *Large Catechism*:

Let us outline very briefly how comprehensively this petition covers all kinds of earthly matters. Out of it a person might make a long prayer, enumerating with many words all the things it includes. For example, we might ask God to give us food and drink, clothing, house and farm, and

a healthy body. In addition, we might ask God to cause the grain and fruits of the field to grow and thrive abundantly. Then we might ask God to help us manage our household well by giving and preserving for us an upright spouse, children, and servants, causing our work, craft, or occupation, whatever it may be, to prosper and succeed, and granting us faithful neighbors, and good friends, etc. In addition, we may ask God both to endow with wisdom, strength, and prosperity, the emperor, kings, and all estates, especially the princes of our land, all councilors, magistrates, and officials, so that they might govern well and be victorious over the Turks, and all our enemies, and to grant their subjects and the general populace to live together in obedience, peace, and concord. Moreover, we might ask that he would protect us from all kinds of harm to our body and to the things that sustain us—from storms, hail, fire, and flood; from poison, pestilence, and cattle plague; from war and bloodshed, famine, savage beasts, wicked people, etc. It is good to impress upon the common people that all things come from God and that we must pray for them.

We are very impressed that what they prayed for in their prayers during 16th century Germany, is exactly the same as what we pray for in our prayers today in Asia. The expressions may differ slightly, but the contents of the petitions are essentially the same. They are things that sustain our body and health; family members, friends and neighbors in the community; all kinds of our labor and industry; good government, statesmen and public servants; peace, justice and concord; good and harmless natural environment, as well as safety and

prosperity. These are the things that are very necessary for our existence, survival and well-being. These can be our existential quest for life and death.

Justice and peace, human rights and dignity, ecology and the environment are essential and indispensable for humanity, both locally and globally. We are encouraged to, or even obliged to pray and strive for their realization. To pray and strive for their realization is our responsibility before God. It is God who realizes “earthly matters” for us, and we are invited to participate in God’s mission.

Here I would like to discuss the rather old theological concept of the “Two-kingdom theory” of the spiritual realm and secular realm. I am aware of the fact that this concept has been regarded more conservative in terms of the church’s commitment to social justice and peace. From the experience of the German Church Struggle against the Hitler/Nazi regime, Lutheran teaching of the two-kingdom had been criticized and less appreciated, even though those church leaders such as Martin Niemoeller and Dietrich Bonhoeffer were Lutherans. Some non-Lutherans are still critical of this teaching.

Teaching of God’s Two Reigns and *Missio Dei*

Today the teaching of “God’s two reigns” is preferred to the teaching of “God’s two kingdoms” in order to avoid the impression that Lutherans believe that Christians live only in the spiritual realm without paying much attention to or interest in the earthly matters of the secular realm. Luther, who stressed so much the doctrine of justification by grace alone through faith and the forgiveness of sin as the core of the Gospel, also recognized the indis-

pensable importance of “daily bread”, that is to say “our entire life in this world”. He knew that those are God’s concern as well. That’s why God instituted two modes or realms of divine rule through spiritual and secular authorities. Two regiments or reigns are both the work of God’s right hand and left hand. God needs the Gospel as well as the law for his creative and saving activities through history. It is our responsibility to develop a theology of salvation as well as that of creation. The completion of creation and the completion of salvation must be integrated and achieved in the time of the Eschaton.

As I mentioned above, the people of the 21st century Asia are suffering from and struggling with the various kinds of issues in the field of justice and peace, human dignity and rights, economy and ecology along with many and different political, social, and cultural problems. I say again these issues and problems are existential issues of life and death. It is for these issues and problems that people are raising their voices and God hears their cries.

Lutheran churches in this part of the world are invited to discern the signs of the age and participate in God’s work in this world. I know that Lutherans have been engaged in God’s mission among the people in many ways. Why don’t we share our experiences and theological convictions regarding God’s activities and our participation.

Whenever we talk about the law or participation in the activities of God’s left hand, a voice of reminder always comes to our mind that we are small in number and weak in social contribution and influence.

Lutheran churches do establish and manage schools, kindergartens and nursery schools, various types of social welfare institutes for the elderly, women, children, infants, physically

handicapped and mentally retarded, hospitals, counseling centers, community development center, and so on. Christians and the Christian church have been pioneers in these fields in many countries. Sending churches have helped the younger churches to build institutions for education, social welfare and medicine. This is a wonderful tradition of the Christian church.

In terms of finance, Asian Christian institutions can be supported by the overseas sending churches and national or local governments. But the national or local churches in Asia often cannot supply adequate numbers of Christian workers or qualified staff. At the beginning of the history of these institutions, Christians occupied the position of founder and staff, but later it was not easy to continue recruiting qualified staff and maintain the spirit of the foundations. I don’t know the situation or statistics of the Christian workers’ ratio in other parts of Asia, but it is the case in Japan that the Christian population is very small. How about other countries in Asia?

What I would like to emphasize here is that we must change our thinking in terms of hiring non-Christians at Christian schools and social welfare institutions. As long as we keep our mind-set to fill all the posts with Christians and active church members, those non-Christian workers could be regarded as second-class citizens because they don’t have Christian faith which they are expected to have. For example, Japan Lutheran College has 15 Christians out of 29 faculty members, and 5 out of 25 staff members. I must admit that this Christian ratio of our College is exceptionally high. Kindergartens, nursery schools and social welfare institutions have a much smaller percentage of Christians.

It is true that the directors are supposed to have Christian faith in order to maintain the

principle or spirit of the foundation and develop services they offer on the Christian value system. But, it is unavoidable to hire non-Christian staff and workers for Christian institutions. How can we justify the hiring of non-Christian workers, and how can we positively accept this fact? It seems that the only good theological justification can be established on Luther's teaching of the two reigns of God. God instituted two reigns, and one of them is the secular realm using non-Christians of good will as well as Christians.

This is not a realm or authority for salvation, but a realm for God to exercise his rule to maintain civil order. I believe this word "civil order" should include everything that helps human beings to live as human beings in a manner as God intended for His creation.

Education, social welfare and other services are to be included in this "civil order" in a broader sense.

Then, we can recognize those non-Christian staff workers as the co-workers for this divine rule on earth. They are engaged in the mandated role. In other words, they are participating in *Missio Dei*. We cannot say that they are serving God for His act of salvation or reconciliation which God offers through Jesus Christ. If we remember an expression of Dietrich Bonhoeffer in his *Ethics*, "the last things" or "the ultimate", then, engagement and contribution of non-Christians are to be appreciated as a part of "the things before the last" or "the penultimate". I prefer this set of theological concepts because the concept of "the last things" guarantees the ultimate importance of the "justification by grace through faith" in all Christian teachings, and at the same time, the rest of all things necessary for human life are also assured as indispensable.

To sum up, we Lutherans in Asia are blessed with the fundamental message of the teaching of "justification by grace through faith" as the core of the Gospel, while our responsibility to serve and contribute to human life in the world is maintained. This is made possible by Luther's theological legacy of the teaching of God's two reigns or that of law and Gospel.

The Church of *Diakonia* and Christian Liberty

Who is the most well known Christian in the 2000 years' of Christian history? Beside Jesus Christ, Martin Luther must be the No.1 most well known Christian by those outside the church because he is always listed and taught at school as one of the great figures in world history. Then, who's next? It is my guess that Mother Teresa will be very popular and well known even after her death 16 years ago. If that is the case, this episode eloquently proves that the expectation of general people outside the church towards Christianity is not only the teaching but also the praxis of love for neighbors. The real situation in which the people of lower or lowest caste live and die and the sisters of the Missionaries of Charity serve them is not foreign to the people living outside Kolkata (Calcutta) or anywhere in Asia.

It goes without saying that the praxis of love for neighbor can be understood and appreciated by those who don't share the common faith, who don't share the common properties such as an ethnic group, nationality, gender, generation, social status, education, culture and even religion. In the case of making Christianity more attractive and more familiar, orthopraxis exceeds orthodoxy in the sight of common people.

Besides the heart-moving words of Jesus

regarding the love for the neighbor, we cannot help building our love for the neighbor on Luther's teaching of Christian liberty. I would quote a pair of theses which seem perfectly opposite or contradictory from his *Treatise on Christian Liberty* (1520) as follows:

A Christian is a perfectly free lord of all, subject to none.

A Christian is a perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject to all.

As St. Paul says in Galatians, "For you were called to freedom, brothers and sisters, only do not use our freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence, but through love become slaves to one another" (5:13), we Christians are made free to serve one another. Salvation from sin and slavery is liberation to serve. That's why Luther worked out a unique but truth-telling, double expression above. Because of the saving action of Jesus Christ on the cross, a Christian was made perfectly free, and because of the freedom he was given by Christ, a Christian was made a perfectly dutiful servant of all. The same is true for the Christian church. As the body of Christ, the church lives and dies just as its head Jesus Christ did, who "came not to be served but to serve" (Mk.10:45). The Christian church is the church of *diakonia* in nature.

The Lutheran church identifies itself with the church of proclamation of the good news and the church of *diakonia* serving the needy. The latter, the church of *diakonia* would not lose the fundamental nature of the former, the church of proclamation, and the former would never stop serving as the latter. Just as God reigns in this world in two ways and leads it to its consummation, the church is responsible for functioning in two roles, i.e., proclaiming the Gospel and serving the people in need, according to God's mandates.

No matter how small or how big it may be, the Lutheran churches in Asia are and must be faithful to God's mission, namely *kerygma* and *diakonia*. The theology and ecclesiology together with theological education of Lutheran churches in Asia must be inclusive in nature and praxis.

Teaching of Justification with Contemporary Interpretation

As I said at the beginning of this paper, Luther's teaching of justification is the principle of interpreting the Gospel from a viewpoint of the troubled soul in relation to God's righteousness. This quest was so urgent and serious for Luther who wanted to live as a Christian monk in the sight of God (*coram Deo*). By the vicarious death on the cross and resurrection of Jesus Christ which justifies the sinner through his grace as a free gift, and not by our own merit of good works, we are forgiven and made alive again to live a life of faith, love and hope.

The fear of a righteous God and the burden of a conscience troubled by the law are not confined to the religious people in the late Middle Ages and even at the beginning of 16th century Germany, but there are not a few souls troubled in contemporary Asia. In that sense, this teaching is still valid today. However, in Asia today, there are many people to whom such a religious question that Luther raised is foreign, or many people are indifferent to such a religious question.

But, those people who are indifferent to such an old, religious question are not necessarily the people who live happily without such an existential and spiritual question at all. Rather there are many who claim that they are "not religious but spiritual". The phrase of "not re-

ligious” means that they are not satisfied with the traditional and established religion such as Christianity, but some of them are asking the value of life or the meaning of death, the world to which one goes after death, the unfinished businesses such as unrealized reconciliation with an estranged friend or family member. They are to be called “spiritual”.

If salvation is presented without one’s own merit earned by one’s good works but “by Jesus’ grace as a free gift”, then this theological principle of the justification by grace alone can be applied to a different context. Today there are many people who are not confident to live in this competitive society because of the lack of some ability or achievement. There also are many for whom the remainder of life is limited because of fatal disease. There are many other people who are suffering from various kinds of spiritual pain. As a Lutheran, I believe the unconditional acceptance of the one who is suffering from spiritual pain in any sense can be and must be declared on the theological basis of justification by grace alone. Our existence is made possible one hundred percent by grace alone. Life is a gift, a free gift. Human value is a gift, a free gift. Our being before God (*coram Deo*) is a gift, no matter how people praise or despise you according to human measure (*coram hominibus*). What is called “the loser” should not be denied his/her value of life or reason for existence, but fully accepted and appreciated just as he/she is with no condition at all.

Then, how to deal with another phrase “through faith”, when one does not have Christian faith? The English word “faith” is a translation of the Greek term *pistis* which has a double meaning of faith and trust. Faith in a Christian sense is a personal trust in the God of Trinity, not simply an intellectual acknowledgement of

the existence of God or the doctrinal system. To have faith is to find some personal being and to entrust oneself to that personal being. The closer one comes to meeting this personal being, and the more one comes to know him, the deeper the trust one holds step by step toward the confession of him as lord and savior. But even before that, when one starts entrusting oneself to this personal being, we could say that one is entering into a personal relationship with this being, and that one is at the first step of faith with which one receives the grace of unconditional acceptance. In this sense I believe we can boldly admit the reality of justification by grace alone through faith in this person.

Lutheran churches or Lutheran ministers must emphasize God’s free gift of justification by grace through faith to the non-Christian people who have lived outside the church with a variety of spiritual pain.

Before I conclude my presentation, I would like to add one more comment on the dominant philosophy of the society in which we live and work, namely the philosophy of success and prosperity, or yearning to become a “winner” rather than a “loser”. In this philosophy person’s value is measured by the measure to what extent you have achieved and attained success in your life.

It is generally accepted and believed that “the richer you become, the more you are blessed by God”. The theology of glory is the theology which people need in the developed countries and the developing countries today when neo-liberalism is dominant economic philosophy of prevailing global economy.

The theology of glory supports and justifies those people seeking for success and prosperity in a very competitive business world with efficiency, productivity and achievement.

But I must ask whether Christ whom Luther found was a God of glory or a God crucified on the cross, whether the theology which he found was a theology of glory or a theology of the cross.

Only the crucified Christ can save the sinner, and only the weak God can be a God of the weak, the marginalized or the “loser”. God of the cross, not a God of glory is the God whom the Bible witnesses to and Luther rediscovered. Only this theology of the cross can be a theology we Asian Lutherans need to identify with.

It is my sincere wish to develop our Lutheran theological heritage in the 21st century Asia through discussion with my fellow Lutheran theologians and church leaders. Thank you very much.

Note

- 1 This was presented at the Conference on Asian Lutheranism and Identity, 5-8 November, 2013, Petaling Jaya, West Malaysia.

本稿は、ルーテル世界連盟（LWF）宣教と開発部門アジア地域の主催により、2012年度に引き続き2013年11月にマレーシアで開催された神学協議会で、主催者から求められてなされた講演である。記念すべき宗教改革500年（2017年）を前に、アジアのルーテル教会のアイデンティティとその神学的課題とをこの時代にあって改めて明確にするためのこの神学協議会にはアジア各国の神学者と教会指導者24名が参集して4日間の集中的な研究と協議を行った。講演題「アジアのルーテル教会のための神学的枠組みの再提起」。