

The 5th International Korea Mission Leaders Forum

Another Reformation on the Horizon

by Chong H. Kim

Introduction

While the center of gravity of Christianity has shifted many times throughout its history¹, no shift has been more significant than the emergence of “Southern Christianity” in recent decades. I refer to the massive movement towards Christian faith in the global South², especially in sub-Saharan Africa, Latin America, most of Asia, and the Pacific Islands. For the first time, Christians from the South outnumber their brethren in the North.³

However, as much as Southern Christianity has exploded in recent years, there exist pockets of people groups—especially among Muslims, Buddhists and Hindus—that have yet to be presented with the gospel. For example, most of the breakthroughs in India are among the Dalits and lower caste groups. This means that higher caste Hindus have not significantly been impacted by the gospel to this date.

Consider the vast unreached Muslim world. Although Islam and Christianity were considered two branches of the Judaic religion by Toynbee (and have much in common in terms of heritage and basic monotheistic beliefs), they began to grow apart significantly following two different crusading events. The first—the Medieval Crusades—brought irreversible damage to Muslim states. The second—western imperialistic domination over Muslim nations in modern history—is viewed by the majority of Muslims worldwide as the modern crusades. Any remaining vestige of tolerance was surely erased after the spread of Western imperialism. At present, the attitude of the Muslims around the world toward Christianity is generally very skeptical, sometimes hostile, even violent. Since Muslims equate Christianity with Western culture, negative Western attitudes toward their culture are seen as being against Islam itself.

Shifts from within

Another major shift within Christianity is taking place right in the South, where, in some places, followers of Christ (who don't want to associate them-

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elves with the Western form of Christianity) have been added to the faith in impressive numbers, and that well below the radar screen of the Protestant mission movement.

For example, according to *The World Christian Encyclopedia*, more than 50 million people make up the so-called African Independent Churches, which have radically deviated from Western forms of Christianity. In India, Herbert Hofer's research in Chennai (Madras) discovered nearly 200,000 "nonbaptized believers in Christ" (NBBC)—more than the total membership of all Protestant church bodies in that city. Hofer assumes that these people may be found not just in Chennai and the state of Tamil Nadu, but elsewhere in India as well. In China, some 50 or more million people make up the unofficial house church movement, a movement that bears very little resemblance to Western Christianity.

The state of Christianity in Japan presents a starkly different reality. Alister McGrath notes:

Especially in Japan, Christianity was stigmatized as a Western phenomenon. The nineteenth-century Japanese colloquial term for Christianity was *bata kusai*, "it tastes of butter," referring to the fact that both butter and Christianity were seen as Western imports to the region (1993:113)

No wonder Christianity did not flourish there. Even in China at the turn of the 20th century, Shenk asserts that,

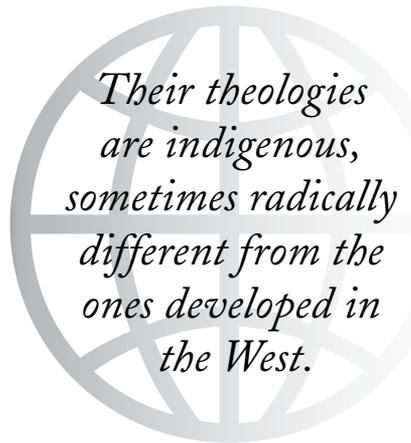
...in effect, Western missions had required Chinese converts to submit to cultural circumcision that, in turn, created a high barrier between them and their fellow Chinese (Sanneh and Carpenter 2005:197).

In other places mentioned above, however, believers avoided "cultural circumcision" by embracing Christ and at the same time rejecting Christianity. Their theologies are indigenous, sometimes radically different from the ones developed in the West. Their understanding of Christ and other essential doctrines of Christianity often seem to

a Westerner to be syncretistic and absurdly strange. Philip Jenkins, author of *The Next Christendom*, observes:

The indictment is clear. Many Southern churches are syncretistic, they represent a thinly disguised paganism, and all in all they make for "a very superstitious kind of Christianity," even "post-Christianity." (2002:121)

Their lifestyles reflect even more strange "Christian" behaviors and "biblical" values. In fact, the only sure thing that is shared commonly is the fact that they have the Bible in their languages.



Who are these peoples in this emerging movement of Southern Christianity? How did they come to where they are now? Why have they not accepted Christianity in its Western form? Where has the modern missions movement gone wrong? Conversely, where has it gone right? Do the different streams within Southern Christianity have anything in common? Do they or will they wrestle with the question of unity with other Christians around the world? What is the future of these movements? These are some of the questions and issues that will be dealt with in this paper.

A History of the Western Christian Mission Movement

First, the general observation that the center of gravity of Christianity moved northward and remained in the North until recent times is not to deny the impressive movement of the faith eastward. Indeed, Moffett's

two volume work, *The History of Christianity in Asia*, chronicles the amazing spread of the gospel to Syria, Persia, Central Asia, China, India, and Japan, sometimes with a vigor and insightful cross-cultural strategies well beyond its time. Moffett claims that the history of Christianity in the East was one of "proud traditions of a Christianity that chose to look neither to Rome nor to Constantinople as its center" (1992:xiii). And A. Mingana, author of *The Early Spread of Christianity in Central Asia and the Far East*, calls the Nestorians the greatest missionaries the world has ever seen (1925:347).

The Western Christian mission movement owes its historical development in large part to the work of two men: the Apostle Paul and Martin Luther. These men laid the groundwork that allowed the gospel to break loose from the previously dominant Jewish and Latin cultures respectively. The Christian faith had been monopolized and locked in with Jewish and Latin cultures to the point that it was inconceivable to have a living faith apart from a Jewish or, later, Latin form of Christianity.

Paul's ministry was greatly facilitated by the wide availability of the *Septuagint*—the Greek translation of the *Old Testament*—throughout the Roman Empire. Jesus and Paul quoted freely from the *Septuagint* when communicating to their respective audiences. These Greek-speaking people included Jews as well as Greeks and other Gentiles throughout the Empire.

By this time, synagogues dominated Jewish life, and non-Jews were being attracted to the God of the Jews and to their Book. Even after the walls of Jerusalem were rebuilt and its temple restored, many Jews simply decided not to return. Thus, synagogues and the scribes—not the temple in Jerusalem—became the center of Judaism.

Many non-Jews chose to be circumcised and became proselytes, following Jewish customs in their worship of God. At the same time, God-fearing Gentiles constituted a significant

portion of the synagogue attendees. They kept their Gentile way of life, but were fascinated by, and attracted to, the God of the Jews.

After Paul was converted from a persecutor of the gospel to an apostle to the Gentiles, his main strategy was to visit the synagogues with his radical message that the Gentiles did not need to be converted to the Jewish culture (including circumcision) in order to follow Christ. This was good news indeed to the Gentiles, but it infuriated the Christian Judaizers who insisted that real faith could only come from being a Jew.

Paul's confrontation with the Judaizers and Peter in Galatia (Galatians 2) was such a serious matter for the churches that Paul wrote that church to warn them against the Judaizers' "false" gospel and to free them to continue following the gospel he preached. Paul powerfully rebutted the proselyte model of the false gospel and presented the "Jewish law-free gospel" that would allow Gentiles and Jews to be common heirs with Christ.

Soon afterward, mounting tensions between Paul and the Judaizers reached a climax at the Jerusalem Council (Acts 15), which eventually rejected the demand that Gentiles be circumcised and required to keep the Mosaic Law in order to be included in the Church. This would be a decisive victory for Gentile believers in Paul's time and for centuries to come. Considering the life and death "tug of war" between the Christian Judaizers, on the one hand, and the Paul and his associates, on the other, the application of the term "First Reformation" to this watershed event is more than deserving.

What finally made the situation swing in Paul's favor was God's word.⁴ The First Reformation removed the Jewish requirement of circumcision for non-Jewish followers of Christ. As a result, Paul's gospel quickly caught fire as a movement. By contrast, the Christian Judaizers grew introspective and completely lost their missionary call to be a light to the Gentiles.

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The Jewish revolt of 66-73 A.D. against their Roman overlords was a turning point in the acceleration of Paul's gospel. Mark Noll records:

The great turning point represented by the destruction of Jerusalem was to move Christianity outward, to transform it from a religion shaped in nearly every particular by its early Jewish environment into a religion advancing toward universal significance in the broader reaches of the Mediterranean world, and then beyond (1997:27).

The gospel broke loose after the demise of the Western half of the Roman Empire and spread to Northern Europe, eventually landing in the British Isles and impacting the conquering Vikings further North during the early to mid-Middle Ages, roughly from 400 to 1200 A.D.

The gospel also advanced eastward during this period. During the Middle Ages, the civilizations in the East were far more advanced than Christianized Europe, which was basically populated with unlearned barbarians whose form of Christianity would have surely collapsed without the help of the Irish monks. The contribution of these monks—who preserved sacred literatures in Latin, Greek, and even Hebrew—reaches far beyond this period. But more importantly, as Thomas Cahill correctly notes,

Illiterate Europe would hardly have developed its great national literatures without the example of Irish, the first vernacular literature to be written down (1995:194).

However, by and large, the Christianity that went eastward didn't last long. For example, Christianity in China flourished then collapsed each time a new reigning dynasty turned against it. In the West, the Holy Roman Empire continued its dominance through Latinized Christianity, but eventually became decadent and fell into decline. Much of Latinized Christianity had a form without sub-

stance, much like Judaic Christianity centuries earlier. As Andrew Walls concludes, "to Christianize was to Latinize, to bring people within the sphere of classical culture" (1996:69).

One remarkable phenomenon during this period was the light that shone all throughout Europe and beyond through the various monastic movements. Monasteries became centers for learning, Christian living, and missionary outreach. They were dynamic and vital, not only to the growth of the Christian faith, but also to the good of society.

Lynn White refers to this period as the Monastic Reformation, a time in which, as Richard Fletcher states, "the monastic communities were anything but uniform" (1997:173). Kenneth Scott Latourette explains further,

Recovery from the decline which Christianity had suffered in Western Europe between the years 500 and 950 found expression and was furthered through fresh monastic movements. These became more numerous and took on greater variety than ever before. Indeed, in diversity they were much more marked than in the Eastern wing of the Catholic Church or than in any of the Eastern Churches. Here, we may note, is one of the criteria of vitality in the Christian community (1975:416).

Ralph Winter provides an articulate summary and adds additional insight. Winter, referring to the statement, "the vitality of Christianity cannot be measured by unity, but by diversity" (1998:20-22), elaborates:

This is just a spectacular insight! It goes against all that we would all want to believe: that when unity finally occurs then strength results. But it's actually the very opposite! According to Latourette, when the dynamic of the Spirit is in full swing across Christendom, that is when, maybe not discord, but a plural result of dynamism occurs (1998:20-22).

It is somewhat ironic to speak of diversity under the most unifying

religious force spanning the longest period in history in the form of Latinized Christianity. This insight of vitality through diversity will be revisited later in this paper.

The Protestant Reformation

The Protestant Reformation had an irreversible impact on history and served as a critical hinge for new expressions of the old and generally decaying medieval Roman Christianity. Depending on one's point of view, the Reformation can be considered either a reformation or a revolution. Likewise, Luther can be viewed as a hero or a heretic. As George Carey notes:

For Protestants [the Reformation] is an important part of their history. It represents the break from the power of the Roman Church, the rediscovery of the Bible and the recovery of the central truths of the Christian faith. For Roman Catholics, however, the Reformation represents something quite different. It is a tragedy, a tear in the body of Christ, a regrettable step that has isolated the Protestant churches from the true life of the Catholic Church. For one side, the Reformation spells freedom, life and vitality; for the other, separation, schism and sadness (1985:21-22)

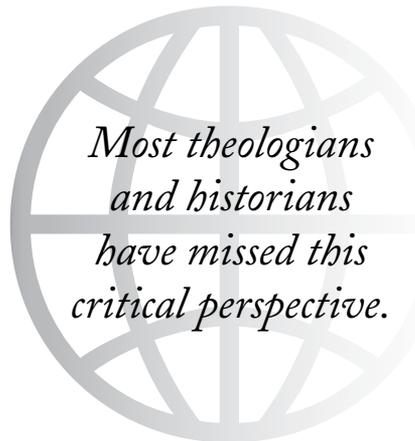
Undoubtedly, other factors led up to the Reformation in which Martin Luther served as a key figure. Luther was an Augustinian monk, a brilliant scholar who eventually became professor of Holy Scripture at the University of Wittenberg. If anyone had a great future in the church, it was Luther. Like Paul, he could have had a promising career. Like Paul, he chose to leave behind him a faith suffocatingly bound by a single (Latin) culture for a liberating faith in new (German) clothing. Whether the situation required a Luther or not, considering the context of the pre-Reformation period, it is not too difficult to fathom the eventual need for a Reformation.

Nearly everyone today agrees that, at the Reformation, the church had reached a particularly low point, largely due to a combination of negative political, social and theological factors. Will Durant concludes,

A thousand factors and influences—ecclesiastical, intellectual, emotional, economic, political, moral—were coming together, after centuries of obstruction and suppression, in a whirlwind that would throw Europe into the greatest upheaval since the barbarian conquest of Rome. (1957:332)

Among the factors listed by Durant are “the intensification of nationalism” and “the nationalistic influence of vernacular languages and literatures” (1957:333). Latourette provides a more convincing picture:

In a sense, the emergence of Protestantism was the reaction of



Teutonic peoples against religious control from the Latin South (1975:700).

Only a culturally sensitive macro-historian like Latourette (who had served in China) could come up with a statement like that! Latourette continues:

...the geographic line of demarcation between those who adhered respectively to the Protestant and Catholic Reformation in part coincided with the boundaries of the Roman Empire...it seems significant that in the Low Countries the southern sections, where Latin culture had penetrated, remained Roman Catholic, while in the northern portions, where the rule of the Roman Empire had sat lightly if at all, Protestantism prevailed (1975:699).

Most theologians and historians have missed this critical perspective. Many still believe that the main cause for the Reformation was theological differences. Ralph Winter's assessment is almost unequaled in this regard:

The political, the cultural, the economic forces are so powerful in this period of

the so-called Reformation that it is very difficult to sustain the thesis that theology was the driving force. Theology was a means of voicing differences. It was a significant reality, but it was not by any means the cause of the Reformation (1998:41-42).

Whereas the political and economic forces behind the Reformation are well documented, the ever-important cultural forces have not received due attention. Indeed, economic forces would not have been much of a factor had the revenues from the heavy taxation of ordinary people been channeled to their own needs. In one sense, then, the history of mankind, including the history of Christian missions, is the story of dynamic cultural forces. Often, political, religious, or theological differences were merely smokescreens for cultural or ethnic differences. Witness the centuries-old struggle between the Irish and Anglo Saxons.

Durant supports the importance of cultural forces behind the Reformation by calling it “a proud sense of German nationality” (1957:305). He says:

All in all the picture is one of a people too vigorous and prosperous to tolerate any longer the manacles of feudalism or the exactions of Rome. A proud sense of German nationality survived all political fragmentation, and checked supernatural emperors as well as supernatural popes; the Reformation would defeat the Holy Roman Empire as well as the papacy. In the 1500-year war between Teuton and Roman victory was once more, as in the fifth century, inclining toward Germany (1957:305).

Earlier in his book, Durant speaks of the Germans as “the healthiest, strongest, most vital and exuberant people in Europe” (1957:302). This “proud sense of German nationality” spelled trouble for the Holy Roman Empire, which did not know how to embrace vernacular forms of Christianity. The heavy flow of tax money to Rome for art projects and the like simply added more fuel to the fires of nationalism that were burning among already culturally and ethnically motivated Germans. Later on, the Counter Reformation was an essentially cultural phenomenon, a show of Spanish power

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with little or no other clear objective than to stamp out Protestant error (1976:298).

In summary, we end this section with Latourette's observation:

It may be further evidence of the close relation of the division of Western Europe between the Church of Rome and Protestantism and the degree of assimilation to Latin culture, that the Holy Roman Empire, which professed to continue the tradition of the political empire which was once ruled from Rome, and which in practice had embraced Germany and Italy, thus including Latinized and non-Latinized peoples and which was already sadly weakened, was dealt a fatal blow by the divisions between Protestants and Roman Catholics in Germany (1975:700).

Summary of the First Two Reformations

There are striking similarities between the first two Reformations. First of all, the Bible had been translated into the vernacular languages and was being used or was soon to be used by the common man. Durant says:

Luther's supreme achievement as a writer was his translation of the bible into German. Eighteen such translations had already been made, but they were based on Jerome's Vulgate, were crowded with errors, and were awkwardly phrased (1957:368-369).

In both Reformations, the Greek and German languages used in the translation work of the Bibles standardized these languages and produced vocabularies for their respective societies. The Greek and German Bibles were the eventual cause of the first two Reformations. In other words, the Bible produced these Reformation movements. Durant again shares his thought regarding the Reformation:

The translations of the Bible shared, as both effect and contributory cause, in that displacement of Latin by vernacular languages and literatures which accompanied the nationalist movement, and which

corresponded to the defeat of the universal Church in lands that had not received and transformed the Latin tongue (1957:369).

Paul Johnson agrees:

[A]s for all reformers, the Bible then was at the centre of Christian understanding, when presented in its authentic form (1976:274).

In the Bible Paul and Luther found the wellspring of insight that would ultimately change them first and then equip them to lead others into the revolutionary nature of the gospel. For Paul, the gospel was the power of God unto the salvation of both Jews and Greeks based on the mystery revealed to him through the Old Testament. Luther's emphasis on justification by faith (not works) and the revelation that people have direct access to God, changed the course of history.

A second similarity between the first two Reformations is that both broke through cultural and ethnic boundaries. The Jewish cultural requirements of early Christianity were removed to give way to Hellenistic Christianity. A vernacular form of German Christianity broke off from its Latin counterpart. Jenkins speaks of the Christianity that went north in Europe after the demise of the Roman Empire and became culturally synthesized:

... but in other vital ways, a largely urban Mediterranean Christianity was profoundly changed by the move to the Northern forests. In art and popular thought, Jesus became a blond Aryan, often with the appropriate warrior attributes, and Christian theology was reshaped by West European notions of law and feudalism. European Christians reinterpreted the faith through their own concepts of social and gender relations, and then imagined that their culturally specific synthesis was the only correct version of Christian faith (2002:6-7).

The Modern Protestant Missions Movement

Roughly two and a half centuries would elapse following the Protestant Reformation without any significant missions advance. By the time Protestants began to take missions seriously, the Western world was severing its ties with its medieval feudal and religious roots, and was undergoing the most significant change in its history since the fall of the Roman Empire. At the same time, the Industrial Revolution was already underway. This "revolution" would affect every facet of life, from government to the everyday life of the now-emboldened common man. Progress was the name of the game. The impact of progress was the separation of the West—which was becoming increasingly industrialized—from the rest of the world. This separation would eventually lead to even greater Western dominance in the form of colonialism. Ralph Winter notes that by 1945, 99.5 percent of the non-Western world was under Western control (1970:12). The spread of Christianity generally went hand-in-hand with the establishment of colonial governments and institutions and thus failed to become localized or indigenized.

Indigenization

Western missions leaders responded to the perceived foreign nature of Western Christianity on non-Western soil by promoting indigenization. Under the heading, "Precursors to Contextualization" in his article, "The Contribution of the Study of New Religious Movements to Missiology," Wilbert Shenk proposes that the

great theoretical breakthrough in missions thought in the nineteenth century was the identification of the 'indigenous church' as the goal of mission (1990:187).

Shenk argues that essentially the same patterns and programs were advocated in 1954 as in 1900. From Nevius' articles for the *Chinese Recorder* in 1885 to Soltau's *Missions at the Crossroads* in 1954—in which he advocated "the

indigenous church” as “a solution for the unfinished task”—the blueprint had not altered much.

The concept of the “three-selves”—developed by Henry Venn and Rufus Anderson, the two leading missiologists of this period—guided missions thinking in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. According to C. Peter Wagner, the “three-selves” concept was useful and necessary at a time when mission societies were trying to shake off an inherited colonial and paternalistic mentality (Nelson 1976:37). John Nevius, mentioned above, wrote a book in 1888 entitled *Planting and Development of Missionary Churches*, in which he developed a policy that would greatly impact the Northern Presbyterian Mission in Korea. His main concern was that the local church be self-supporting, self-governing, and self-propagating much like Venn and Anderson’s “three-self” formula. Pentecost, Wong, and Larson have observed that the emphasis of Nevius’ method seemed to be the planting of the Church in one’s own geographical and cultural area (Nelson 1976:88). They claim that Nevius was struggling for local church growth, rather than missionary growth of any kind (1976:88).

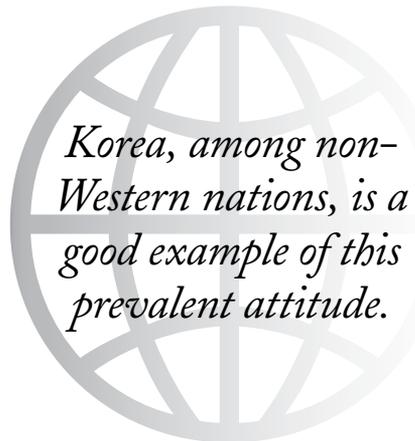
It is sobering, perhaps even shocking, to consider Shenk’s analysis:

Missiology has experienced a similar sort of lag in theoretical development. The theoretical foundations laid by Anderson, Venn, Speer, Allen, Warneck, and Schmidlin in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries remain largely intact. In spite of a steady flow of critical studies of the philosophy and methodology characteristic of missionary work since 1800, and notwithstanding calls for new paradigms, we are still dependent on that original inheritance (1990:180).

That we continue to depend on the theoretical foundations laid by Anderson, Venn, and others may be explained by the very success of the Christian movement. Like they say, “if it ain’t broke, don’t fix it” Indeed, Christianity has successfully lapped up neglected and peripheral minorities around the world who have had nothing to lose

by converting to a Western form of Christianity. Many tribal groups languishing under oppressive regimes have responded favorably, seeking an outside “big brother” and its religion, with all its perceived benefits. As it would be unthinkable for the oppressed to adhere to their oppressor’s religion, such groups have naturally sided with the more powerful Western world, its culture and corresponding religion, hoping to escape their unfortunate and inferior status under these regimes.

Another factor contributing to its success was the widespread desire in the



non-Western world to industrialize as quickly as possible, especially after World War II. Many non-Western countries faced serious societal and economic crises for which rapid industrialization seemed the best solution. Korea, among non-Western nations, is a good example of this prevalent attitude. Though Christianity had reached Korea well before the Japanese occupation (1910-1945), Korean Christianity grew quite handsomely during that period.

Koreans readily accepted Western Christianity for cultural and political reasons, though this is certainly not to say that their faith was not genuine. As a result, Korean Christianity has a heavily Western flavor to it even today. Thus, for cultural and political reasons, Koreans and other tribal groups were content to maintain their own versions of a Western form of Christianity.

Leadership Training

The strategy of training national leaders was added to basically undergird the three-self movement. This strategy, while not new, assumed even greater importance, a fact which reflects the growing anti-Western missionary mood of the time. After the tumultuous social rebellions of the 1960s worldwide, the beginning of the 1970s saw the call for a moratorium on Western missionaries, who were no longer wanted around the world, especially where strong national churches had already been planted. Understandably, the number of career missionaries from the U.S. began to decline around this time.

Though the term “contextualization” was introduced in 1972 to eventually replace the older term “indigenization”, Melvin Hodges wrote the book entitled *The Indigenous Church*, published by Moody Press in 1953. In it, he gives a stern challenge to raise up national leaders:

The government and extension of the church in any land must eventually be left in the hands of national leaders. These men are Christ’s own gift to His church (Ephesians 4:11-13). Without such men, the task of establishing an indigenous church would be hopeless. Since it is precisely at this point that many missions have failed. We shall endeavor to point out some of the mistakes of the past, giving also some constructive suggestions... Let us again bring our objective into clear focus. Our aim is to develop the national church rather than the mission station. We are to provide leadership for the national church, not merely helpers for the missionary (1976:53).

A couple of decades earlier, Soltau’s work, *Missions at the Crossroads*, sounded a similar concern:

the forward-thinking missionary will increasingly realize that the main emphasis in his work will be that of training leaders rather than winning souls (1955:175).

All in all,

essentially, the charge that has been brought against the modern missionary movement is that it was but another attempt to universalize something which was profoundly

There is no perfect theology in any cultural context, no silver bullet theology . . . Yet, most assumed that Western theology had all the answers . . .

particular and parochial, namely Western civilization (Walls and Shenk 1990:186).

More specifically, it was Western Christianity that the young churches rejected as they desperately sought their own expression of the faith. In his book *Anthropological Insights for Missionaries*, Paul Hiebert proposed a fourth self called “self-theologizing.” A true three-self movement cannot be sustained unless it is grounded in an indigenous synthesis of theology. The theology that the young national churches were taught was essentially a Western theology made to run the three-selves method.

Hiebert’s call for self-theologization was a critical insight, one that was long overdue. Theology is culture-bound. There is no perfect theology in any cultural context, no silver bullet theology that fits into all cultures. Yet, most assumed that Western theology had all the answers and simply needed to be transferred whole cloth into the new cultural context. This assumption can be traced to long years of domination by the West, and its correspondingly condescending attitudes toward less “civilized” nations. It was clear to most Western missionaries of the time that one goal of missions was to civilize. Hiebert plainly states:

Most of us were raised within a church and taught its theological confessions. We were monotheological and assumed that there is only one way to interpret the Scriptures, that all deviations from this approach were false. It comes as a shock, therefore, when we find honest, deeply committed Christians interpreting the Bible in different ways (1985:196-197).

He goes on to explain how “theological shock”, much like culture shock, takes place. Different or radically different interpretations of Scripture in other cultural contexts challenge one’s theological assumptions and naturally force

one to seriously examine one’s interpretation of Scripture.

Why is the Western Church so monotheological? McGrath lists two basic factors of the dark side of evangelicalism, further solidifying Hiebert’s observation above. The first factor in McGrath’s list is “intensely dogmatic attitudes” (1993:143). He states that it is no secret that many people are alienated from some forms of evangelicalism precisely because these streams are so intensely dogmatic. He shares the other factor:

All Christians can agree on the need to defend what is of vital importance to the Christian faith. Yet often issues of relative importance are blown up beyond any sense of proportion, forcing evangelicals to defend themselves to each other when they ought to be proclaiming the gospel to the world. The demand to “defend the gospel” too often turns out to be “defend my rather rigid version of the gospel.” (1993:145)

When this analysis is extended into a cross-cultural missions context, it may explain why self-theologizing is easier said than done. Separating “one’s rather rigid version of the gospel” from the gospel itself involves identifying one’s cultural additions thereto. Removing such cultural additions should be a prerequisite to contextualization. Ralph Winter even coined the term “de-Westernization” to describe this process. Earlier, Paul Tillich had stated:

Protestantism is a highly intellectualized religion. The minister’s gown of today is the professor’s gown of the Middle Ages, symbolizing the fact that the theological faculties as the interpreters of the Bible became the ultimate authority in the Protestant churches (1948:227).

The high intellectualism of Protestantism has been a double-edged sword. In the case of the Student Volunteer Movement, its zeal for higher education—which, in itself could be considered a

strength—produced a serious missiological blunder: the unfortunate replacement of pulpit and other leadership ministries once occupied by “uneducated” national leaders.

Listen also to the claim by Gregory Bolich:

An evangelicalism united in the faithful proclamation of Christ need not claim authority—it is authority. Challenges to the authority and veracity of the Bible are also challenges to the validity of evangelical existence (1980:180).

Is evangelicalism authority? Bolich boldly equates the authority of the Bible with the validity of evangelical existence. He obviously has great confidence in evangelicalism and gives it a perfect grade. Such a short-sighted and parochial perspective will most likely continue to lead evangelical missionaries to intensely dogmatic theological attitudes in a world of religious and theological diversity.

Unless the focus is initially on diversity and letting diversity reign as a way to disengage from the ideal of being a unifying force, there will not be unity. Moreover, either evangelical missionaries will buckle under theological shock or recipients may be persuaded to continue Western theological patterns. In some cases, as has been seen before, some will branch off and start their own versions of Christianity.

Two Versions of Southern Christianities?

Ralph Winter, in his article “Four Men and Three Eras”, proposes that the modern Protestant missions movement can be categorized into three eras led by four men. The first two eras (1792 to 1980) were led by “Northern” missions leaders such as William Carey and Hudson Taylor and movements like the Student Volunteer Movement.

These two centuries can be mildly characterized as the most explosive centuries in human history. Under the banner of “progress” and modernity our planet has witnessed everything from two world wars to population

explosion to Western imperialism to incredible technological breakthroughs in science and medicine—realities which have made the world what it is today.

The Protestant missions movement began after a long hiatus and went first to the coastlands (following Carey), then inland (following Taylor), according to Winter. Going to the “frontiers” has been the hallmark of the modern Protestant missions movement, epitomized by Taylor’s persistent call to go inland. Missiologically, strategy evolved from utilizing mission stations to raising up indigenous leadership. Theologically, Protestantism was further formulated and later, evangelicalism would gain momentum and become the fastest growing religion of modern times.

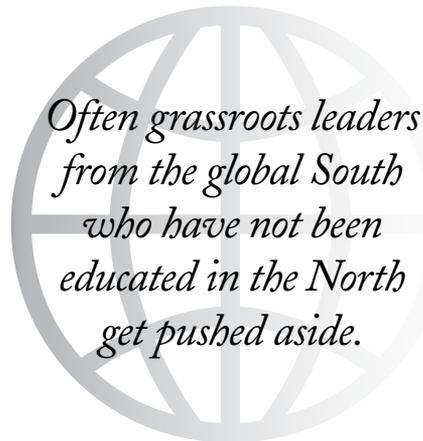
Winter believes that the third era could and should be the final era led by Northern and Southern missions movements alike. Not only are there more believers in the global South than in the North, there are now more cross-cultural missionaries from the South as well.

This creates new challenges and opportunities on the field due to a growing missionary force that did not exist before. For example, everyone believes in the need to partner together, especially on the field. However, field partnerships usually consist mainly of Northern workers with only a handful from the South. With the emergence of Southern workers, what forms should field partnerships adopt? In what language should they communicate? Do relationship building and working culture of field partnerships reflect western or non-western values?

A closer look at the phenomenon of Southern Christianity reveals the emergence of two streams of faith. One form of Southern Christianity has acquired, in varying degrees, the characteristics of Northern Christianity, i.e., Northern Christianity was basically copied over to the Southern form with little change. Some are more Northern than others, but they

are undeniably rooted in Northern Christianity. In fact, some forms of Southern Christianity have become strikingly more Northern than the Northerners. While Northern Christianity has developed an increasing amount of cultural sensitivity and appropriate contextualization strategies, some forms of Southern Christianity have remained stale and continue to hold on to the teachings and practices from yesterday’s Northern missiology and theology.

The other stream of faith in Southern Christianity is decisively



non-northern or non-western. This non-northern Southern Christianity also varies greatly. Many are syncretistic, and they represent a thinly disguised paganism. All in all, they make for “a very superstitious kind of Christianity,” even “post-Christianity” (Jenkins 2002:121).

Four Categories of Christianities

On closer examination, there are four broad and loose categories of Protestant Christianity.⁵

Northern

While Northern Christianity varies greatly from Anglican to Assemblies of God, its main common heritage is the Reformation. Continuity has been preserved with the essential aspects of the Protestant tradition and theologies remaining intact. The expansion of Northern Christianity was accompanied by an expansion of political and commercial interests and powers, as well as by the expansion

of a modernist outlook on life. As a result, Southerners who desired these political, economic, and cultural forces became attracted to this kind of Christianity.

“Northern” Southern

One natural outcome of Northern expansion was the development of “Northern Southerners”. On the outside, Northern Southerners are Southerners. But their theology is essentially Northern. The education and training of so-called national or indigenous leaders from the global South have mostly taken place in the Northern context with Northern content. Often, grassroots leaders from the global South who have not been educated or trained in the North get pushed aside and are considered backward and outdated. It is safe to assume that Southern Christianity is run and led by Northern Southerners. It is doubly interesting because formal training, at least in U.S., has been deemed generally irrelevant, and, in fact, in crisis. What else explains the assertion that many major seminaries in America would collapse were it not for their Korean students?

Consider also recent global level missions consultations. It is rare to find Southerners who have not been educated in the West. Listen to the concern raised by Roger Hedlund:

Increasingly the real leaders of the Christian movement in India may well be its “humble faithful” and grassroots charismatic leaders rather than the powerful elected officials who generally represent India at international conferences (2000:76).

“Southern” Northern

The third category of Christianity is harder to notice and represents the fewest number of people. They are the so-called “Southern Northerners”. They represent one group of apostles and pioneers in the missions movement. They recognize the shortcomings and failures of the culturally heavy-handed approach of the Northern Christian movement. They are the promoters and practitioners of the self-theologizing principle. They often stand in support

At the risk of being labeled postmodern pluralistic “syncretists” or even heretics . . . they continue to plow away behind the scenes.

of the relatively new movements, such as insider movements, churchless Christianity, and the African Independent Churches movement. At the risk of being labeled postmodern pluralistic “syncretists” or even heretics by both the Northerners and Northern Southerners, they continue to plow away behind the scenes.

Southern

The fourth category is the group I call Southerners. With the focus only on Christ and the Bible, they represent the growing number of believers in the Southern continents. In some Islamic contexts, the followers of Isa read both the Bible and the Qur’an. They are not told (by Southern Northern workers) to stop reading the Qur’an. The decision is left solely to the followers of Isa. However, the reading of the Bible wins out in the end over the Qur’an. But they don’t want to be called Christians. To them, Christianity is western. Following Christ and obeying the word of God is all that matters. Exegesis is often nonexistent and their view of the Bible is rather “flat” with little or no understanding of historical depth.

Obviously, these Southerners have little or no contact with the first category of Christianity. They may know of peoples in their region or country that have been part of “Northern” Southern Christianity. Some leaders of this category may have some contact with the Southern Northerners, but by and large, most are sealed off by any contact with Northerners.

For example, the major characteristic of China’s house churches movement is their “independence from any political control, either on the part of the government or of foreign churches or mission organizations” (Dyrness 1992:48). Similarly, the term “Independent” in the African Independent Churches movement refers to their independence in

organization, leadership and religious expression from western-oriented historical (also called “mainline”) or mission churches, according to M.L. Daneel (1987:17). The term and its meaning of independence reflects a clear departure from Northern and Northern Southern Christianity.

Another Reformation

Another Reformation is decisively on the horizon, specifically in reference to the first two categories of Christianity being pitted against the fourth category of Southern Christianity. Southern Christianity has been taking heat and criticism, much like Protestants were treated by Catholics during the Reformation. There are significant pockets of peoples who are Hindus, Muslims, traditional African religionists, and Chinese that are saying yes to Christ and no to Christianity. They are “independent” and want to remain independent from Western Christianity. Their theologies reflect critical societal and religious issues such as ancestors, caste, spirits, suffering, etc., to which Northern Christianity has very little to offer. In an ideal Western world, it would not be too difficult to separate cultural from religious elements in such a way that one can claim to integrate the former while carefully keeping a distance from the latter. However, such an ideal translated into expectation has no operating room in Southern Christianity. Southern Christianity’s theologies viewed from the perspective of the Northerners have been deemed to be syncretistic at best.

What About Syncretism?

Consider the word “syncretism.” It can be described as a mixing of elements and symbols from different religions. Syncretism has to do with replacement or dilution of the essential truths of the gospel through the incorporation of pagan elements. The term is

often used in a pejorative sense and is a taboo word for cross-cultural Christian workers, something to be avoided at all costs. The replacement or dilution then is considered illegitimate and even dangerous. But a revealing question is, “Who decides that such mixing is illegitimate?” Or “In whose perspective is such mixing dangerous?” The answers are often related to issues of power and control. It is the official leadership that decides and even condemns those “who have not yet arrived.” Andrew Walls offers a fine example.

The sacredness held to attach to certain places and objects is strange—until one remembers that the same strictness of observance may attach to many an Anglican sanctuary in Africa, where no lay person, above all no woman, may sit beyond the rails. The prescriptions laid down by independents often seem a strange mixture of African tradition and Levitical law (and indeed very often it is African tradition reasserted on the basis of the Levitical law). But in how many African Anglican or Methodist or Presbyterian churches are women simply quietly absent from Communion during the menstrual period, or do men in effect observe the rules of ritual purity laid down in the Old Testament? (1990:118)

Syncretism cannot be avoided in a world where cultures and religions meet and coexist in various ways. Can one start with the premise that syncretism is normal and unavoidable, as the gospel confronts and engages cultures and religions? On a personal level, can one look at his or her own journey of sanctification as a “desyncretization” process? Aren’t there syncretistic elements that need to be redeemed and ruled by Christ in the lives of godly men and women? Sanctification assumes the existence of sinful human tendencies and thus should assume the existence of syncretistic elements in any form of Christianity.

Furthermore, if contextualization is done right, then again, from whose perspective? Who has the final say as to whether it was proper contextualization or syncretism?⁶

What About Unity?

Much has been said about the unity of the body of Christ, as distinguished from uniformity of belief. Unity is often associated with diversity. If another Reformation is approaching with inevitable force, the topic of unity is sure to flare up again. True Southerners have not been and will never be part of any regional "Christian" gatherings, much less the global conferences. The "Southern Northern" practitioners on the fields do not mix on a strategic level with other "Northerners" and "Northern Southerners". Surely, separating unity in Christ from unity in Christianity will be of significant help. Is unity a gift that is already given to His Church through Christ? Or is unity a goal that needs to be achieved as part of God's call to His people?

Going back to the Reformation, John Dillenberger and Claude Welch's comment is helpful:

[W]hat separates Protestantism and Catholicism is precisely the positive character of the understanding of the faith which each represents (1958:304).

Meanwhile David Edwards raises the question,

Is it possible that more unity is growing through the acceptance of diversity combined with a common belief in the Christian essentials (1997:602)?

Acceptance of diversity must be a prerequisite for growing unity.

George Carey claims that the Bible is God's secret uniting weapon (1985:13). He says that in taking the Bible seriously, Roman Catholics realize at once that they have something in common with their separated brethren in other churches. Winter's observation does not discount the unity factor. Rather, he adds another dimension:

Why wouldn't the unity that Jesus extols in John, and that Paul talks about, bring people together rather than separate them? In part, it's because biblical faith is such a precious reality that people take it to themselves, to their own language, their

own culture, to the point where they can't see that other cultural expressions are equivalent. So Christianity, or the biblical faith, has been actually the basis of disunity as well as the cause of unity (1998:41-1).

Conclusion: One More Look at Contextualization

Are different theological and expressive forms within true Southern Christianity anything new? A closer look at the development of Western Christianity teaches valuable lessons. Bart Ehrman, in his book,



Lost Christianities, offers significant insight. He starts off the book by saying that

As historians have come to realize, during the first three Christian centuries, the practices and beliefs found among people who called themselves Christian were so varied that the differences between Roman Catholics, Primitive Baptists, and Seventh-Day Adventists pale by comparison (2003:1).

He explains that in early Christianity, there were Christians who believed in one God, two, thirty, or even 365.

The intensity of the disputes, if nothing else, shows that there will always be diverse beliefs so long as there are diverse believers. This diversity shows itself as well in the circumstance that the proto-orthodox victory never did stamp out heretical perspectives completely, despite their every attempt to do so. Heretical views continued to live on, even if only in small pockets of believers in out-of-the-way places. Some of the beliefs and practices that I have described as "lost,"

in fact, have recurred in modern Christianity where, for instance, there are various groups of "messianic Jews" who insist, somewhat like their Ebionite forebears, on maintaining Jewish customs such as keeping the Sabbath, following kosher food laws, and observing Passover, while believing in the death of Jesus for salvation (Ehrman 2003:251).

Insider movements, Churchless Christianity, or African Independent Churches can replace messianic Jews in the quote above.

The time factor is crucial in contextualization. The word "contextualization" implies process. Process requires time. Any contextualization process takes place over time. If the proto-orthodox victory never did stamp out heretical perspectives completely and heretical views continued to live on, perhaps we can say that every form of Christianity is still being contextualized. And yet Western Christianity has little patience with the development of proper contextualization in the global South. This is by far the most serious mistake the Western Christian mission movement has made. They predetermined that theirs was the proto-orthodox Christian faith and everybody else had to adjust to their standard sooner rather than later. Paul Johnson's approach is almost identical to Ehrman's:

Granted this, it was inevitable that the Church expanded not as a uniform movement but as a collection of heterodoxies. Or perhaps 'heterodoxies' is the wrong word, since it implies there was an orthodox version. The Pauline system did, indeed, become orthodox in time, but the other Christian versions which spread from Jerusalem were not deviations from it but evolved independently. From the start, then, there were numerous varieties of Christianity which had little in common, though they centred round belief in the resurrection (1976:44).

Johnson's view on the contextualization process is a little more generous. He sees that the Pauline system did become orthodox in

The true Southerners have not and never will be part of any regional “Christian” gatherings, much less the global conferences.

time. Western Christianity is now considered orthodox. It is also true that other “Christian”, that is, Southern versions are not deviations from the Western “orthodox” version. The Bible is clearly the source of unity as well as diversity. It is God’s secret uniting weapon.

At the same time, the Bible is God’s secret diversifying weapon, as Winter says. Sanneh claims that the Christian faith became true to its unique translatability nature or “mission as translation” and exploded into other vernacular traditions and soon absorbed them into the faith (1996:29). In due time, the place of orthodoxy will be given to the peoples, groups, and/or communities that read and study the Bible. The Bible will ultimately correct all kinds of movements if given the opportunity. Andrew Walls makes a solid point:

In the end, the history of African Christianity will be a single story, in which the missionary period is only an episode. The judgment of the churches of Africa will not be whether one can denominate them “older” or “independent”—that distinction, I believe, will in time, and perhaps soon, become meaningless. Their judgment, like that of all the churches, will be by the Lord of the Church on the basis of his Word (1996:118).

Perhaps Andrew Walls is right. In the end, the history of global Christianity will be a single story, in which the “missionary period is only an episode”. Their judgment, like that of all the churches, will be by the Lord of the Church on the basis of his Word! **UJFM**

Endnotes

¹The Christian faith marched North, first from Palestine to the Mediterranean basin, then to Northern Europe with the help of the Irish, and then to North America.

²The term “Global South” has become more popular in many circles, due to the potentially offensive and out of date connotations of describing a “Third” world. Wikipedia describes the North-South divide as

the socio-economic and political division which exists between the wealthy developed countries, known collectively as “The North”, and the poorer developing countries, or “The South”. Although most nations comprising the “North” are in fact located in the Northern Hemisphere, the divide is not primarily defined by geography. The term was coined to differentiate the cultural divide between East and West.

³This Southern reality is cause for celebration for the predominantly Western (Northern)-led modern mission movement. One Buddhist nation, Korea, has produced an incredible success story of Christianity in modern times. Christianity in China has also experienced explosive growth, especially after the Communist Party took over in the late 1940s and expelled all of the expatriate missionaries. In this case, the expansion of Christianity resulted without the Western expatriate missionaries’ direct work and influence. Many in India have come to faith in Christ in recent decades. The spread of the gospel in Africa and Latin America in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries has been unparalleled. A few minor breakthroughs have also taken place among Muslims, the Javanese of Indonesia being a notable example. Following a massive harvest of Muslims back in the 1960s especially, followers of Christ in that country (from both Christian and Muslim backgrounds) may comprise as much as 16 percent of the country’s population. Since religious statistics are a sensitive political issue, the actual percentage may be higher.

⁴In Acts 9: 16-19, James quotes from Amos 9:11,12 (from the Septuagint) in which the remnant of “Edom” (in Hebrew Old Testament) had been translated as remnant of “mankind” or “men.” James’ decision then was (v. 19) “we should not trouble those Gentiles who are turning to God”.

Walter Kaiser Jr. explains this plainly:

When the Christians in Acts 15 hear this passage quoted, they say, “Okay. The plan of God in the Old Testament—the promise doctrine of God given to Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and David—includes the Gentiles. And in the house of David—the kingdom of David, the dynasty of David—there were Gentiles as well. Why are we fighting? Now we will make certain recommendations” (1998:207).

⁵The boundaries between these categories can be porous. And the people who adhere to one certain category of Christianity can embrace other categories of Christianity.

⁶Sometimes it is a matter of perspective, as Herbert Hoefler offers a helpful example from India:

The caste system in India has not produced a new problem of mission. It has produced an Indian form of an old problem (2002:151).

For one, E. Stanley Jones was famous for attracting followers of Christ beyond the organized church.

Jones made a distinction between Christ and Christianity. His was the “Christ of the Indian Road.” Christ must be distinguished from Western culture. Eventually Jones dropped the term Christianity altogether. Indians must be free to follow Christ without compromising their nationalism (Hedlund 2000:68).

Hoefler’s conviction is not different from that of Jones.

However, some might argue that this is just the danger with the “ishta devata” strategy I am proposing. It will lead not to an indigenous Christianity but to a Christianised Hinduism. Perhaps more accurately we should say a “Christ-ized” Hinduism. I would suggest that really both are the same, and therefore we should not worry about it. We do not want to change the culture or the religious genius of India. We simply want to bring Christ and His Gospel into the centre of it ... The real move toward an indigenous Christian faith can never come from the Christian community. It must grow out of the ‘Churchless Christianity’, with the help and encouragement of the church (2002:208-209).

David Edwards offers a similar insight into the Buddhist context.

This Mahayana form of Buddhism may therefore be seen as not far from its contemporary, Christianity. Beginnings have already been made

in developing it into an eastern form of Christianity, seeing Christ as the Enlightened who leads into a nirvana where the mortal self is blown out only in order to be resurrected into a glory—and who also leads into the fullness of human life before death. If it could gather strength, such a Buddhist Christianity would be different from trade and colonialism, whisky and bullets (1997:584).

Northern Christianity's attitude is not too different from the Christian Judaizers' attitude toward uncircumcised Gentile believers during early Christianity. Listen to Hoefler, author of *Churchless Christianity* relating the first century issue of circumcision with twentieth century issue of baptism.

The parallel issues of cross-cultural evangelism which we see between circumcision in first century Asia Minor and baptism in twentieth century India raises the missiological question about the place of baptism in our evangelistic work. Baptism was clearly not intended by Paul to separate people from their homes and societies. Rather, baptism was intended solely to communicate the freeing and regenerating the transcending Gospel (2002:154).

He elaborates further:

Where the Christian mission has reached into animistic societies like those of early Europe, baptism has generally been viewed as uplifting and liberating. However, in many other parts of Asia and Africa, people have not admired the Western civilization which came along with the Christian missions. When baptism was presented to them as a call to separate themselves from their traditional cultures, the people hesitated-like the God-fearers hesitating before circumcision (2002:155).

Clearly baptism was not a call to separate people from the rest of their mainstream culture. Other discussions regarding some pertinent theological and missiological topics, such as the terms "Christian, church, and conversion" among the four categories of Christianity as discussed above would surely ignite major differences of opinion which can then potentially undermine Christ focused movements. Other topics such as "What is salvation?" will stir deep into one's theological framework.

Similar to the Reformations before, the Bible is playing a huge role in creating naturally indigenous forms of Christianity, which are viewed as radical departures

from Northern Christianity. Lamin Sanneh delivers a keen insight:

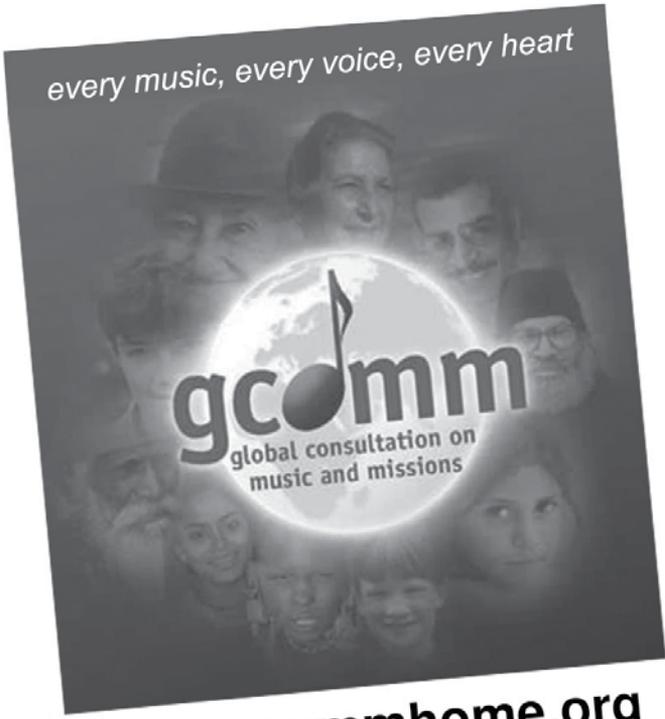
One spectacular result of the creation of the vernacular Scriptures was the emergence of prophet movements and African independent churches. With the availability of such Scriptures and the ability to read them in their mother tongue, Africans arrived at a powerful sense of their own indispensability for the enterprise from which mission had excluded them (Walls & Shenk 1990:70).

The house church movement in China is developing similar results due to the availability of Scriptures and the studying of the Word. For many Chinese house church believers, the Bible is the only Christian literature, and it is being read again and again. This automatically shields them from biased outside theological viewpoints, which often would not be culturally sensitive.

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