

**Response to Dr. Amos Yong's paper on Asian American Theology
Grace Hsiao, June 16, 2011, ISAAC Scholar lecture, San Jose, California**

All of you, Kiem, Tim and especially Amos---I am so excited you are here, excited for the discussion and excited about the subsequent discussions I hope your talk will prompt. Every now and then you come across a piece of work that resonates, that helps you understand something you've long puzzled over, and Amos, your paper is that for me.

[This paragraph was skipped at the event for the sake of time.] Before I get to that, it is good practice to summarize my main understanding of your paper and to give us another opportunity to digest your thinking. You think there isn't really an Asian American Evangelical theology mainly because Evangelical theology itself doesn't allow for it. Because of Evangelical theology's own historicism, particularities and contextualities—rooted in Enlightenment Foundationalism and its reactionary origins to Liberal theology, its defensive and immutable pose is to stand by a universal set of beliefs from the Bible, portable and applicable to any human being and situation, which in turn make it closed off to historicity, particularity and context—because it sees no need. This unwittingly has bitten Asian Americans, the good students that they are, in the rear end, as it leads them to deny or minimize their own ethnic and cultural histories and contexts. And while there certainly are pockets of Evangelicalism that are starting to become more aware and open to these realities, their solution while well meaning, is not exactly embracing either. It marginalizes minority theologies, histories, and contexts as an afterthought, as material fitting to be in the last volume of a major Reference work, but not part of the central core of what is most meaningful and important to Evangelical theology. You challenge this, and your prescription is for Asian Americans to undertake the theological task and, among other things, to love our white Evangelicals neighbors by helping them understand their origins, their context and thus themselves.

Your ideas give me the excitement one gets when you finally begin to receive something you've long been waiting for. As someone who did not grow up Christian, as someone educated in liberal and secular schools, the Evangelical subculture has always puzzled me. These are my brothers and sisters in Christ, and I was surprised that they were so different from me!

This is a good time, to give you some context on me. I am, as introduced, ISAAC Northern California's up-and-coming Regional Director, and as such, the question that most interests me is how Asian American theology affects life on the ground, how it affects every day life. I care primarily about how individuals and groups grow in Christ. The role I see myself playing here is one of a non-scholar who is trying to start the process of connecting high-level theory with everyday practice.

As I said, I am not a scholar, but I have worked in several church and parachurch contexts and am a graduate of an Evangelical seminary. I grew up in a non-Christian home an hour away from New York City, and in the 1990s, like lots of other Asian Americans bucking the trend and failing to fall away from faith, I met God in college. I

came across Asian American Christian materials for the first time when I was involved with InterVarsity Christian Fellowship. For those of you familiar with InterVarsity, ethnic identity development and multi-ethnicity are two of its cherished topics. And while embracing multi-ethnicity was already a given for me, I initially did not understand why ethnic identity was important to my relationship with God. As I reflected and prayed about who I was as a Taiwanese American woman, I was surprised by how the gospel opened up more for me. To embrace who I was as a Taiwanese American was to show me how present God is in the midst of my confusing multi-cultural life experiences, to discover how much God made me who I am, and subsequently to know how much God loves me. Jesus incarnates into our lives, and the Living God does indeed meet us where we are at, how we are, as we were made.

For the last ten years or so, I've mainly been in Evangelical contexts—working with people primarily from Christian colleges and people who've grown up in Christian homes. Promoting the Urbana Student Mission Convention allowed me to travel around the country and meet different Evangelical churches and missionary organizations. Attending Regent College in Canada—the other Regent—exposed me to Evangelicals that were not only American, but Canadian and British and Australian and Asian too. Please understand—I am definitely Evangelical myself. I love these people. I have laid my life down, and will do so again. But we all have areas of growth, myself included, and our call as Christians is to follow Jesus, which includes coming alongside and walking with our neighbor wherever he or she is at. To do so, we need to befriend our neighbor, and learn to see what God is already doing in our neighbor, who in this case is my family in Christ. As someone who did not grow up in the Evangelical subculture, I saw some inconsistencies that greatly perplexed me, and I wanted to understand them so I could better love them, love God, and love myself. Your talk Amos gives me so much understanding! Please allow me to expand your work, and respond by illustrating how I see our Evangelical disdain for historicity and context working out on the ground. Your talk elucidates for me four main things.

- 1) **Why we Evangelicals do not seem in touch with reality in the world and within ourselves.** I often hear from non-Christians, or my friends who no longer consider themselves Christian that we Evangelicals need to “get real.” They feel like we Evangelicals do not seem to understand how real life works, how Evangelicals ourselves seem hypocritical when it comes to caring about other people, how sometimes our viewpoint seems overly (and annoyingly) sunny because we are not considering true hard and painful details. (Think Ned Flanders.) Historicity and context mean knowing what is really going on in the world. We are called to be in the world, but not of it, and to make sure we're really not of it—we need to have some knowledge of the world and its nuances, some knowledge of the context of our neighbors and cities.

I also often hear from non-Christians how we Evangelicals are hypocrites. They do not think of us as the most self-aware people because we do not seem to practice what we preach. Whether or not this is fair is another discussion, but historicity and context mean being aware of our own selves. Think of how many

testimonies you hear that are exactly the same template. Those who are the most rooted in knowing God are the ones who have filled in the most details, who have thought through the circumstances of life and their hearts, and thought through how God has changed their life. They have, in short, considered their personal historicity and context with God. This past Easter, I was very disappointed to drive an hour for a friend's baptism, to learn that they had cut all the testimonies, because there was no time during the service. I cannot think of anything more relevant and tangible for an Easter service than hearing how Christ has died and given new life in actual real people. Did the service planners forget the importance of historicity and context? Christ has risen, and has given us real people new life!

- 2) **Why we Evangelicals are not poised to know others, especially other Evangelical Christians who have not grown up in the Evangelical sub-culture.** Despite our value for evangelism and missions, I have always been perplexed by how difficult it was to engage in conversation with Evangelicals. I've made a lot of mistakes trying to make friends with Evangelicals. As someone who grew up non-Christian, I've had to learn a lot of new jargon, and as I've fumbled looking for words, I've said a lot of wrong things. More than a decade ago, while promoting Urbana, I was in a van with eight other Evangelical white men, and I used the term "liberal" instead of Tony Campolo's term "radically orthodox" to describe my faith. The silence in that car for the next three hours was deafening. No one bothered to ask me what I meant, to ask me to present my vision of the gospel or the Christian life so I could redeem myself. I learned on that day, that while "liberal" means a very different thing to a non-Christian, it is perhaps the ultimate bad word in Evangelical circles, and to never use it in reference to myself ever again. As people of the Word, we Evangelicals rightly take words very seriously, but this has sometimes made me feel as though I'm walking in a minefield. The onus is on a new Christian to learn the words him or herself, and the onus on a Christian who is a stranger to you to use these right words. The posture is not to listen, but to test whether that person believes as we believe. Any wrong step outside a limited set of gospel words makes us suspicious. Our heads think and sometimes our faces scowl, "Okay, this person is probably not a real Christian." We often too quickly conclude that this person is not a brother or sister in Christ, and we make him the enemy. This perplexes me as I think of Jesus' clear call to us to love our neighbor. Even if he is rightly not an Evangelical Christian, aren't we still called to love our neighbor? How can we love our neighbors and make friends with them if we are not open to them? I think we are the ones who miss out, because we do not put ourselves in a position to learn from people who are different from us and sharpen for us what it means to be a follower of Christ.
- 3) **Why we Evangelicals have difficulty growing after we are saved.** Eugene Peterson calls us our spirituality an adolescent one. We aren't exactly known to be the deepest people in the world are we? The question I hear all the time, especially from my no-longer-new-Christian friends is this: what happens after

salvation? I'm saved now, but ...now what? What does it mean to grow deeper in relationship with Christ? We Evangelicals are bad at answering these questions. And after engaging with Amos' thoughts, I do think it is in part because of our lack of attention to our own history and context. We're not adequately discipling people because we don't know how to integrate Christ with our life. One pastor told me recently that seminary taught him how to exegete the Bible but not how to exegete his congregation or himself. If we do not know how to read and see what is happening in our congregations—if we do not know how to talk to the people who are very different from us in our own congregations, if we cannot see what God is already doing in their lives—and, if we do not know how to see how God is already at work in our own selves—then how can our churches grow? And while I think many Evangelicals recognize the importance of the heart, of going again and again to God with your sins, there are still many who unintentionally and unwittingly misinterpret Christian growth in their own lives as knowing in knowledge, or perfecting our behavior. Without a heart change, we compartmentalize our lives and we fail to embody the true fruits of the Spirit. As a whole (we can all think of exceptions—but as a whole), do we Evangelicals feel like we truly embody the fruits of the Spirit?

- 4) **Why we Evangelicals sometimes think seminary is irrelevant to our ministries and personal lives.** While both Evangelicalism and Evangelical theology were birthed out of a desire to preserve the essentials of the Christian faith, they appear to have addressed two different audiences, despite the universal desires of the latter. Evangelicalism is at its very best a revival movement that has always been interested in personal conversion, which is grounded in a person's story, history, context. To extract from the song *Amazing Grace*, "I once was lost..." (I was an alcoholic, I was depressed, I was not loved by my family) "...but now am found..." (but Jesus loved me just as I was). Christ found each of us, in our deepest places of hurt, in our weaknesses, and he met, and still meets us personally. Undoubtedly, this is important to us! Christ truly died for us real, gritty individual people and yet, Evangelical theology does not value history or context. What is up with Evangelical theology? Is it truly a theology for Evangelicals, a way of thought that describes the heart of what we believe, the essence of we want to live out? I think most Evangelicals on the ground would answer no. The chasm between seminary and church parallels the one between intellect and piety in the Evangelical mind. I agree with Mark Noll, the scandal of the Evangelical mind is that there is not always one.

This split between seminary and church, between intellect and piety, to me is the biggest problem within Evangelicalism. Seminary is meant to be in service of the church, but now it can barely communicate with the church. Theology is meant for doxology but many parts of the church cannot even understand what the word "doxology" means. No wonder the rest of the church does not see seminary as relevant.

We Evangelicals need to recover the heart of our movement—to know God, to live lives

fully committed to God, and even yes, to quote John Wesley, “to feel our hearts strangely warmed.” We need to extend the line from the ground up and continue to ask our seminaries for theologies that can truly help us to grow, truly help us to deepen our experience of Christ. We need seminaries, we need our professors and scholars to think deeply about historicity and context—even if it means re-writing all of Evangelical theology—to reflect on what it means to be Christian in an increasingly dynamic, global and multi-ethnic world. Help us, so we can be more effective in our evangelism and discipleship. Help us, so the entire church can grow.

Theology done with an Asian American lens, by Asian Americans—or by any historicized and contextualized minority group—can most definitely help mend this chasm in Evangelical theology. As part of non-majority Evangelical culture, as people who swim in various cultures, we can most feel the rough edges of where this theology fails to make sense. We can feel the rough edges because it hurts us the most as our children fall away, as the best and brightest theologically-trained among us seem more and more out-of-touch, as we fail to grow deeper in Christ together due to differences in language, educational level, economics, generation and culture. We Asian Americans can help because we experience this every day and we are immediately in need of a central Evangelical theology that is not defensive, but that can mend us and bring us together in Christ.

Amos, thank you so much for starting this conversation.