

Epistle to Jason

by Daniel D. Lee, PhD

Dear Jason,

As I recall our many coffee conversations about the challenges of pastoral ministry, I believe the overarching theme of identity—both our identity and God’s—could organize the direction of our discussions. We might think of this double identity as a way of paying homage to John Calvin and how he ordered his theology as the knowledge of ourselves and knowledge of God. We now know better and, by remembering the cosmic dimension of the gospel, think beyond simple anthropocentric terms for theology—lest we forget about our precious earth and all that is in it, which we have been squandering. But this double identity question gets us to what we have been sorting through as you have contemplated how to practically and theologically own being a pastor of an Asian American church, not just a church that happens to be filled with Asian Americans.

What I mean by our identity is that we, the Church in the U.S., have, for so long, failed to bring our whole selves in our discipleship and spiritual formation. We have been blind to the various aspects of ourselves that have been erased through the process of white suburban middle-class American exnomination—i.e., the assumption that there is no need to name our different identities because we are *just human*. Of course, liberation theologies of various expressions put up protests, but the dominant American and American Christian sentiments on the ground continued in this failure to see us clearly.

While in his time prophetic, Martin Luther King, Jr.’s quotes about the eleven o’clock Sunday morning being the “most segregated hour in America,” and about us needing to be “judged by the content of our character and not the color of our skins” are still popular and

continue to misguide us today. These quotes are hopelessly anachronistic for our time and aggravate our problem of blindness instead of illuminating the right path. The diversity of churches today, following the 1965 Immigrant and Nationality Act, cannot honestly be labeled as segregation. Rather, when immigrants arrived, they brought their vibrant churches with them. Also, many churches were planted to reach these immigrants because the older Black and white churches could not. Those who repeat this misguided segregation reasoning fail to see how multiethnicity in churches often functions as white normative propaganda—a vision of superficial and mostly decorative diversity. Likewise, while the seemingly colorblind racial justice of King’s time made sense in terms of equal treatment, when the 1964 Civil Rights Act was passed, it became clear that we needed to actually see and record race in order to address it. In a sense, colorblindness after the Civil Rights Act is racist, a way to ignore the long history and deep structures of racism in our land. While important in that particular time of our nation, King ultimately did not impact the doctrinal understanding of God, nor did he help us to see and fully own ourselves in God’s presence.

In a missed opportunity, the missional church movement of the late 1990s and 2000s, which sought to engage the U.S. Church contextually with missiological insights and tools, was mostly fixated on modernity and post-Enlightenment influences, following the perspective of Lesslie Newbigin. The dominantly white normative and white academic frame unsurprisingly assumed itself to be universal, marginalizing the experiences of the racial minorities.

With the reckoning of the Black Lives Matter protests, the U.S. as a whole and the Church in particular began to challenge its colorblindness and colorblind theology, at least in the sense of a black-white binary. Even with all the ethnic and racial diversity of the U.S., we barely seem to understand its history and society beyond the reductionistic black-white binary.

Obviously, the problem with this simplification is more apparent on the West Coast and specifically in California, with its large Hispanic and Asian American populations and their long histories—our long American histories. For us Asian Americans, the anti-Asian racism and violence connected with COVID-19 shook us out of our white adjacent delusions, forcing us to see and own our bodies and ourselves, as well as the whiteness of white Christianity that we so comfortably grew up with.

Sadly, the nascent awakening out of colorblindness abruptly hit a wall with critical race theory as the new boogeyman that is going to destroy America. Many Christians, especially racial minorities, are seeking to forge ahead, even as the populist white voices are calling for a return to the good ole' white colorblind racism of the past.

While we can analyze our current state from sociopolitical and cultural perspectives, the problem lies in our theology and the very identity of our God. We do not believe that our identities matter spiritually because we do not believe they matter to God. If our various identities are, at best, cultural treasures and, at worst political idols, they have little theological claim. We must go beyond differences of experiences to the very nature of God. As I always say to my students, everything hinges on the question of who God is—or, more specifically, what kind of a God our God is?

In wrestling with these matters, I have come to see that our God is the God of the covenant. This covenantal nature of God is revealed in God's election of Israel, as a mutual belonging of God with God's people. In Martin Buber's terms, God desires an *I and Thou* relationship with God's people, not a *I and I* or *I and it* kind of relationship. This *I and Thou* relational dynamic with God exists at a personal and also a communal level, as individuals and as communities.

Looking at the various biblical narratives—whether they be Moses under the Egyptian empire, Daniel in the Babylonian empire, Esther in the Persian empire, or Paul under the Roman empire—their callings are not a generic one-size-fits-all kind, but rather specific to who, where, and when they are. As we think about the various aspects of our identities, how do they impact God’s call upon our lives? The particular or contextual calling of God is not merely an accommodation to who we are, but often a direct confrontation of our identity that leads us to deep surrender and transformation. Essentially, contextual theology is not a watering down to make things palatable but can be a laser-focused recognition of our versions of sin and rebellion, ultimately for all of ourselves to be used for God’s kingdom.

Blaise Pascal’s *Memorial* confesses that our God is the “God of Abraham, God of Isaac, God of Jacob, not of the philosophers and savants... God of Jesus Christ.” In that sense, we can remember that our God is a living God, not an abstract universal idea. This living God means the contemporaneous presence of Jesus Christ, whom we must attend to personally and communally. This living God impacts how we think about the very nature of theology. We cannot just repeat the theological reflections of the past—not even the classics of Augustine, Aquinas, Luther, Calvin, Barth, the so-called church fathers, the greats. We cannot be like the seven sons of Sceva, seeking to cast out the demons of our age in the name of Jesus Christ—that Paul knew, that Luther protested with, or that Bonhoeffer reinterpreted. No such second or thirdhand encounter with the living Christ will do. While we must learn from the wisdom of the past, our theological and pastoral task is our own burden we must wrestle with. Past theologians cannot do this for us, and copying them with reprimating desires will only lead us astray.

As I have shared before, so many of our fellow Korean American pastors are struggling to pastorally lead because they have not begun to own who they are as Korean Americans—their

Koreanness, their Asian Americanness, their Americanness, their gender, socioeconomic status, and more. Unfortunately, this kind of pastoral failure is commonplace on a national level, including those of all races and ethnicities, consequently leading to blind spots and prejudices, invisible proclivities, and bias. We are also failing to see the particular gifts and insights, and most importantly the unique callings that God has for each of us and each of our communities.

While you and I began with theological affirmation of pastoring an Asian American congregation, I think we can now see the ramifications of confessing God as covenantal for all our pastoral challenges in our nation. We cannot simply look to the past to order present theological priorities or take shortcuts to our spiritual solutions; our reading of scripture must be with the prayer of illumination, seeking Christ's presence and voice with us.

I am sure you see the dangers of such an "activist" reading of scripture and a "constructive" approach to theology for our pastoral challenges. However, a non-contextual approach is no less dangerous, isn't it? After all, there is no way to prevent cultural encroachment to the gospel that we continually suffer, no way out of seeking God desperately.