

Mission from a Position of Weakness

Colleagues,

Every now and then I do a book review for *MISSIOLOGY*, the journal of the American Society of Missiology. Couple days ago I sent this to the book review editor. So it's also this week's post for ThTh #552. Exactly one year ago today it was ThTh number 500. When/where will it end?

Peace and Joy!

Ed Schroeder

Mission from a Position of Weakness.

By Paul Yonggap Jeong

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This book is Paul Jeong's doctoral dissertation at Fuller Theological Seminary. Its thesis is: Christian mission—beginning with Jesus himself—was “mission from a position of weakness,” the position of the underdog, the nobody, the outsider, the marginated. Jesus as suffering servant Messiah—no surprise—is the archetype for all Christian mission. Yet mission from a position of weakness has not been true throughout mission history. Also in our own day. Too bad. Christian mission is undermined—in worst cases, fails completely—when the “position”

of the missionary is one of power. Conclusion: the principle of mission from a position of weakness should be the foundational mission paradigm for the whole Church of Christ.

Jeong documents his thesis with one chapter portraying “weakness” missiology in each of the following:

- Luke-Acts, Pauline Theology, Two case studies from world mission history (the Celtic Church and Wm Carey), selected missiological writings (Kirk, Newbigin, Bosch, Moltmann, Yoder, Las Casas and Pentacostalism). He closes the circle with an extended analysis of the history of the Korean Church where weakness-mission and power-mission are still in conflict.

Each chapter is a pearl in itself, but this reviewer longed for a firmer thread holding the necklace together. Perhaps that’s a bit much to ask from a doctoral dissertation. Questions such as these persist:

1. Is weakness vs. power merely a sociological-political “position” from which the missionary works, or is it already a theology, finally a particular sort of Gospel, that is being proclaimed by that missionary? Jeong leads us to believe that the same “true” Gospel can be proclaimed from either “position,” but that it is the position which renders that Gospel finally more or less credible. I don’t think so.
2. In his chapter on Paul, where he works through the Pauline texts in I and II Corinthians, Jeong never tells us that Paul’s sharpest criticism of his Corinthian competitors, those “superlative apostles,” was not the high and mighty “position” they assumed over the “peasants” in the congregation, but their “other Gospel” that accompanied their self-positioning. Paul is at pains to show the beleaguered Corinthian Christians that the self-assumed

“glory” of these missionaries is of a piece with their “theology of glory,” and that this glory-theology—yes, every glory-theology—is in conflict with the theology of the cross. In fact, it negates the theology of the Crucified and Risen Messiah. And therefore Paul shouts out his mantra in the opening paragraphs of I Corinthians: “I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and him crucified.” “Power-position” in Gospel-proclamation is (always?) linked with “glory-Gospel,” and all glory-gospels are not the Good News rock on which Jesus builds his church. Jeong almost says this, but he doesn’t show us how and why this is so. And thus his critique of power-position in mission never lets us see why it really is wrong—not simply because it is contrary to the way Jesus did his mission—the WWJD argument—but because it contradicts the Good News itself that is at the very center of Jesus’ mission—and therefore ours as well.

3. This item may just be something coming from a curmudgeonly old Lutheran. Although “theology of the cross” is Jeong’s frequent label for the golden thread of his message, he never once mentions Luther in connection with the term. If anyone, it is Moltmann who gets the credit. But had he asked Moltmann, he would have been told that it was Luther who bestowed on western theology the language of cross-theology vs. glory-theology. And that Luther did so with his own exposition of the very same Corinthian texts that Jeong highlights. It’s all there in Luther’s classic “Heidelberg Theses” of 1518. Makes me wonder: Is Luther unknown at Fuller?
4. To be sure, you can’t say everything in one dissertation. So we can perhaps hope for a sequel from Jeong, a second book that applies the same “weakness” dipstick to church life today—not just missiology—especially in the USA. Here’s a thesis: the American “solution” to theological

disputes among Protestant Christians was denominationalism—each group going its own way. But in doing so each group built its own modest (or not so modest) empire. However, empires always bring with them glory-theology—willy nilly. A “weakness-empire” is an oxymoron. If the “empire” of the 16th-century Roman church was afflicted with “glory-theology,” as Luther contended, then how can mini-empires of smaller church pyramids be any different? If denominational churches in the USA—especially among us so-called main-liners—are shrinking, shrinking, is it sociology that shows us why, or is it glory-gospels and power-pyramids that are being exposed—yes, exposed by God? There’s only one apostolic solution for coping with glory gospels. It’s Jeong’s thesis for mission from weakness: “I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and him crucified.”