

Introduction

The present work is a constructive proposal for theological methodology addressing the Asian American context using the resources and trajectory of Karl Barth's theology. While it hopes to contribute to the field of Barthian studies and of Asian American theology, this work is not an exhaustive analysis of either field. Rather, it focuses primarily on employing Barth's theology to develop a methodology for engaging the Asian American context. This methodological focus means that it is an integrative and synthetic work, bringing seemingly disparate thoughts and concepts together. We should note that the Asian American context serves as an example or a case study because the methodology that is proposed here translates to other contexts.

With the center of worldwide Christianity moving to the global South, and even as American Christianity becomes more reflective of immigrant populations, the theological need for a deeper engagement with context is more urgent than ever before. Karl Barth offers much wisdom and insight for the churches of the majority world and for these ethnic churches, even though he is often seen as just a figure in the Western historical tradition. Barthian reception in the Anglo-American context as well as Barthian studies bear some guilt for this narrow perception. And even in recent years, while genetic-historical research has done so much to recover the "contextual" Barth, excavating Barth's interaction with his context has more often been the main focus, often lacking constructive proposals for extending

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Barth's thought to contemporary issues and challenges, especially regarding cultural plurality. This work is a contribution to the development of a connection between Barth and contextual theology, to the stimulation and enrichment of both.

One clear proof of the need for such a work, not just in the Asian American context, but worldwide, lies in the discrepancies between contextual theology and lived Christianity in the global South and in minority communities in the USA. On the one hand, postcolonial theology, with its liberationist rubric, gives voice to the majority world and the minority Christianities in the USA. On the other, the grassroots Christianities of these segments often remain disconnected from these often academic representations. Speaking from the Asian context, Simon Chan has articulated this exact dynamic in his recent methodological proposal to theologize from the ground up, starting with grassroots faith.¹ Chan rightly critiques academic theologies with their elitist agendas for their disconnection from the people on the ground, and thus, his contribution is welcome.

As a so-called modern day church father, Barth's wisdom and influence cannot be ignored. However, for the most part, he has not been considered a source of insights and inspiration for the task of contextual theology or theology explicitly situated in context. Partly, the disconnection between Barth and contextual theology arises from the state of contextual theology and its methodological presuppositions that do not adequately recognize the dangers of cultural captivities and domestications of the Word. We should note that while we use the term "contextual theology," we admit that it is highly problematic because every theology is contextual, whether consciously or not. What our global context requires is a shift from "contextual theologies" to the "contextuality" of all theology. In fact, the truth that every theology is contextual is now universally acknowledged. However, it often remains merely a simple undeveloped assertion. The contextuality of some theologies might

1. Simon Chan, *Grassroots Asian Theology: Thinking the Faith from the Ground Up* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Academic, 2014).

be explicit and developed, while the contextuality of others might remain implicit and even unconscious, and thus, even more vulnerable to cultural captivity.

When engaging the context means capitulating to it, Barth's approach cannot but be seen as purely anticontextual. According to still-lingering conventional wisdom, Barth represents a way of doing theology that simply says "Nein!" to any constructive engagement with the context. Of course, such a view, albeit still popular, misses a much more nuanced truth of Barth's contextuality, the nature of Barth's theological interaction with the context. To many who have only known his *Nein*, the wisdom of looking to Barth for insights concerning contextuality will seem very suspect. Therefore, we begin with a short *apologia* for looking to Barth for wisdom about contextual theology.

Why Karl Barth?

While there are many works throughout his theological career that we can highlight, the most significant articulation of Barth's contextual theological approach is found in a very short letter that was published posthumously. In this letter in *The South East Asian Journal of Theology*, Barth exhorts non-Western theologians to engage in the task of theology concretely in their "new, different, and special situation with heart and head, with mouth and hands."² Overall, Barth does two things in this letter. He describes what his constant theological agenda has been throughout his career, and he also offers some advice for these Asian theologians.

In describing his work, Barth first provides "two small criteria," which would enable them "to judge whether [they] had understood what [his] concern in theology has been, and is."³ First, theology should be free from all "Babylonian captivities," that is, cultural or contextual strictures to the freedom of God. Whether this concern was expressed

2. Karl Barth, "No Boring Theology! A Letter from Karl Barth," *The South East Asian Journal of Theology* 11 (Autumn 1969): 3-5. This letter was penned by Eberhard Busch, Barth's last assistant, and approved by Barth. See Eberhard Busch, *Meine Zeit mit Karl Barth: Tagebuch, 1965-1968* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 2011), 677.

3. Barth, "No Boring Theology!," 4.

as the “infinite qualitative distinction” between God and humanity, the “Godness of God,” the Wholly Otherness of God, the *Realdialektik*, the precedence of the divine Subject, asymmetric dialectic, actualistic ontology, or any number of *simuls* found throughout his works, Barth sought to remain faithful to the freedom of God from the context.

Second, “Yes” should be the dominant note. “No boring theology! No morose theologians!” exclaimed Barth.⁴ Barth’s doctrine of election with its universal implications brought the Yes to the forefront, making it explicitly dominant. Joy is a recurrent theme that occurs throughout the *Dogmatics*.⁵ So, in these two criteria, we have the controlling foundation of Barth’s contextuality.

In addition to these self-reflections, Barth also offers “two friendly suggestions.” First, he encourages these Southeast Asian theologians to “say that which [they] have to say as Christians for God’s sake, responsibly and concretely with [their] own words and thoughts, concepts and ways!”⁶ Barth reminds them that they “truly do not need to become ‘European’, ‘Western’, not to mention ‘Barthians’, in order to be good Christians and theologians.”⁷ This explicit call to contextuality is not simply a kind word to “contextual theologians” in some “pagan” land. Rather, it is the same calling that Barth himself sought to live out, using his own words and concepts—indeed, his philosophical tools—to speak of God as he has described above. This is his understanding of his own vocation as well.

Second, Barth admonishes these Asian theologians to remember that we all need “to believe, to trust and to obey only one Spirit, one Lord, one God,” and to proclaim “the one event” of Jesus Christ.⁸ This point, along with the first one, constitutes Barth’s *double particularity*, which will be discussed further in chapter 2: The particular Word of that one event speaks to all of us in our particular contexts. In *CD IV/1*, Barth states the same concern this way:

4. Ibid.

5. See John Mark Capper, “Karl Barth’s Theology of Joy” (PhD diss., Cambridge University, 1998).

6. Barth, “No Boring Theology!,” 5.

7. Ibid.

8. Ibid.

Christians will always be Christians first, and only then members of a specific culture or state or class or the like. . . . Christianity exists in Germany and Switzerland and Africa, but there is no such thing as a German or Swiss or African Christianity (IV/1, 703).⁹

In this letter, written three weeks before he died, Barth outlines not only the kernel of his theological concern but also a rough outline of theological contextuality.¹⁰ Using this letter as a signpost, it is possible to tease out the evidence of this contextual sensibility in various parts of Barth's vast corpus.

This letter is not the only reason why Barth should be considered a major source for wisdom about theological contextuality. We will later examine various works that have highlighted Barth's theology as missional or as a theology of mission.¹¹ Moreover, we will delve into the way Bruce L. McCormack's seminal work with its genetic-historical approach shifted the direction of Anglophone Barthian studies toward Barth's contextuality.¹²

In the latest example of such research, David Congdon theorizes that Barth's break with liberalism was fraught with missiological import. In fact, Congdon argues that we see Barth's "dialectical theology from the outset as a theology of mission, understood as a theology concerned with critically interrogating the relation between gospel and culture."¹³ A careful study of Barth's early interest and engagement with missiology reveals that his rejection of liberal theology also meant the denial of "an imperialist and colonialist form of mission."¹⁴ While

9. In terms of allegiance and the danger of ideological cooptation, Barth is right to argue for us being a Christian first. However, given that there is a pervasive and assumed European and white normative of Christianity, this argument would need to be decolonized before it can be of benefit to Christians of every background.

10. The letter is dated November 19, 1968. Barth died on December 10, 1968.

11. See John G. Flett, *The Witness of God: The Trinity, Missio Dei, Karl Barth and the Nature of Christian Community* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2010); and Darrell L. Guder, ed., *Missional Church: A Vision for the Sending of the Church in North America* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998).

12. See Bruce L. McCormack, *Karl Barth's Critically Realistic Dialectical Theology: Its Genesis and Development 1909-1936* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1995).

13. David W. Congdon, "Dialectical Theology as Theology of Mission: Investigating the Origins of Karl Barth's Break with Liberalism," *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 10, no. 4 (October 2014): 390-413.

14. *Ibid.*, 391.

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Congdon's short article cannot cover the whole extent of his proposal, his overall interpretative vision is this:

Barth's career can and should be understood as the consistent attempt (a) to critically oppose the church's capitulation to a culturally captive Christianity and (b) to construct a positive alternative account of knowing and following God that is not liable to such captivity and is, for that reason, a theology of mission. Put another way, a theology is genuinely *missionary* if it makes the crosscultural movement of the gospel internal to its message and logic—that is, if it funds the freedom of the gospel for new situations. Seen from that perspective, Barth is a profound theologian of mission from the beginning.¹⁵

No doubt, the genetic-historical approach has prompted a more careful and accurate reading of Barth. However, McCormack critiques those who mistakenly saw his approach as “an exercise in historical theology and nothing more,” missing its “constructive level” and “what this implies for theology *after* Barth.”¹⁶ This present work is an attempt to build upon the genetic-historical research and insights to construct an Asian American theology, with much broader implications for global theology.

The idea of seeking after a theology *after* Barth is, in fact, very Barth-like. Barth made it very clear that he himself was not a Barthian. He was a fine example of how to move beyond his teachers as a student. Whether as a student of John Calvin or Wilhelm Herrmann, Barth believed that just repeating their words as his own or making their views his was not truly learning from them.¹⁷ As a matter of fact, “those who simply echo Calvin are not good Calvinists, that is they are not really taught by Calvin.”¹⁸ Rather, being “taught by Calvin means . . . doing our best to follow him and then—this is the crux of the matter—making our own response to what he says.”¹⁹

There are those who find Barth so brilliant a teacher that they feel

15. *Ibid.*, 407.

16. McCormack, *Karl Barth's Critically Realistic Dialectical Theology*, vi.

17. Karl Barth, *Theology of John Calvin* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 4–5, 71. Karl Barth, “The Principles of Dogmatics According to Wilhelm Herrmann,” in *Theology and Church, Shorter Writings 1920–1928* (New York: Harper and Row, 1962), 238–39.

18. Barth, *John Calvin*, 4.

19. *Ibid.*

they cannot disagree with him and attempt to move beyond him.²⁰ Surely, a theologian's call to move beyond his or her teachers is not just a matter of ability, insight, or inspiration, but is a matter of faithfulness to the present moment as well. Dialogue with a teacher such as Calvin "may end with the taught saying something very different from what Calvin said but that they learned from or, better, through him."²¹ Just like the Israelites in the wilderness, who could not live on old manna but had to gather it each day, we must listen for the Word of God *here* and *now*. Of course, this attention to encountering the Word in our own particularity is exactly what Barth taught as a teacher. This Word is never simply a repetition of past encounters. This way of learning to move beyond is what Barth says of Herrmann as a teacher:

I let Herrmann say to me one essential truth. This truth, followed out to its consequences, later forced me to say almost everything else quite differently and finally led me to an interpretation of the fundamental truth itself which was entirely different from his. And yet it was *he* who showed me that truth.²²

No such radical diversion from Barth's theology will be found here, but there are places where we forge paths that Barth never did. For those constructive attempts at contextual faithfulness, we offer no apology to Barth or to any others.

In sum, Barth's self-aware contextual dynamic, missional outlook, and proper theological pedagogy are reasons why he has so much to contribute to our rapidly globalizing situation and why he should be studied for deep wisdom about contextual engagement.

20. Torrance states, "Barth is not a theologian one can criticize [*sic*] until one has really listened to him and grasped his work as a whole and discerned its place in the history of theology." While I agree with the general tenor of Torrance's statement, I wonder if this is the path to becoming a Barthian, rather than a student of Barth (Thomas F. Torrance, *Karl Barth: An Introduction to His Early Theology 1910-1931* [London: SCM, 1962], 7-9).

21. Barth, *John Calvin*, 4.

22. Barth, "The Principles of Dogmatics According to Wilhelm Herrmann," 239.

Layout of the Study

The method of this study can be described as constructive-integrative. The overall movement is to appropriate key theological insights and elements from Barth's theology—such as actualistic ontology, threefold doctrine of reconciliation, radical Christocentricity, ecclesial orientation, and rejections of abstractions and of natural theology—to use as building blocks for understanding contextuality. Moreover, the Asian American context will serve as the concrete setting for demonstrating this new understanding of contextuality. Engaging the Asian American context will involve an integrative dimension of incorporating social sciences and church praxis with theological contextuality.

This work integrates research and insights from three primary fields: 1) Barthian studies, focusing on the contextual nature of Barth's corpus and his theological treatment of culture, as well as missiological insights from his doctrine of vocation, 2) works on contextual theology, intercultural theology, and global theology, and 3) various proposals for Asian American theology. Therefore, the pattern of engagement and development for every chapter will be to proceed first by discussing Barth; then, general contextual concerns; and finally, Asian American theology. This threefold synchronic structure of each chapter guides our agenda to employ Barth's theology for the development of contextuality in general, and of Asian American theology in particular.

The argument of the book will develop as follows:

Chapter 1 begins the study by proposing a new way to define or frame the particularity of a context. By exploring Barth's thoughts on Jesus's Jewish flesh and its connection to Israel as God's elect, we sort out exactly where cultural/ethnic particularity fits into the context for receiving God's Word. Next, we bring these ideas into conversation with the works of J. Kameron Carter, Willie Jennings, and Kathryn Tanner, covering race, identity, and culture. We argue that in receiving God's Word, the context must be understood as concrete, enveloping

all aspects of cultural/ethnic particularities; however, these particularities must be dealt with in a nonessentialist fashion, meaning that they must not be treated as being constitutive in a changeless manner. This dialectical position of being concrete, yet nonessentialist in defining the context is the key argument of this chapter.

Looking to the Asian American context, we critique three representative methodologies of Asian American theology using this concrete, yet nonessentialist definition of the context. Acknowledging the weaknesses of these methodologies, we introduce the Asian American Quadrilateral (AAQ) as a working definition of the Asian American context that incorporates the four intersecting spheres of Asian heritage, migration experience, American culture, and racialization. The rest of the chapters build upon this new framework for understanding the Asian American context and developing an Asian American theology.

Chapters 2 and 3 make up the heart of this book, showing what theological contextuality meant for Barth and what it can mean for our current situation, the former chapter addressing the *formal* questions, and the latter, the *material* ones. Chapter 2 explains the theological and *formal* bases and dynamics of contextuality through Barth's actualism, which means that God is continually and always the Subject of divine revelation even when God becomes the Object of our knowledge. This actualism is the engine that runs the Barthian theology that engages his contemporary context. It is the logic of Barth's contextuality. Highlighting this actualism explains how Barth was both a theologian of the Word, as well as a highly contextual theologian. At its heart, Barth's contextuality is rooted in the God who is alive and present in the world. This presence is the justification for the contextuality of all theology; we must listen for God's Word here and now.

We describe the outworking of Barth's actualism, or the truth of this living God, in terms of *double particularity*, *God's counter-questions*, and the *universal-particular dynamic*. These three concepts will be unpacked in depth later, but here, we offer a teaser to whet the appetite. *Double particularity* refers to the place of theology that must account for the

particularity of revelation and the particularity of our context. *God's counter-questions*, which challenge our questions, are what distinguishes Barth's method of correlation from Paul Tillich's, for example. The *universal-particular dynamic* refers to how the universal gospel must be mediated via particular expressions, and to how these particular expressions of the gospel must be in service of the universal church. The complex dynamics of these concepts are articulated, and then, illustrated in Barth's understanding of the nature of the Reformed confessions. These concepts can serve as interpretative tools for all theologies in engaging their context.

Moving to the Asian American context, we propose three crucial theological tasks for any Asian American theology: knowing the context, critically engaging the context, and remaining in communion with the one universal church. We should note that these tasks are critical in all theologies. They protect the Asian American theologian from various dangers and distortions when navigating the universal-particular dynamic. Moreover, these three tasks reside at three different levels of theological reflection: the methodological, ecclesial, and personal levels. While the academic disciplines of systematic and practical theologies are considered distinct, they cannot be separated if the context is taken seriously—as it is here. Each of these levels of theological reflection addresses the various theological tasks that are needed in the church.

Chapter 3 focuses on the *material* concerns of what engaging the context concretely means. After evaluating various approaches to understanding Barth's theology of culture, we propose a new way of dealing with culture by drawing from his doctrine of reconciliation. Incorporating the idea of *participatio Christi* (participation in Christ) from Barth's view of election as universal and christological, we present a triadic cultural reconciliation as an interpretive rubric, where the justification, sanctification, and vocation aspects function together to engage various dimensions and trajectories of culture. Interacting with Niebuhr's typology and drawing from the critique and insights of Kathryn Tanner, John Howard Yoder, and Lesslie Newbigin,

this reconciliation rubric is envisioned as a grammar to judge, transform, and call for divine purposes any aspect of culture, while remaining dynamic, dialectical, and nuanced.

We bring this triadic grammar to bear upon each of the four aspects of the AAQ: Asian heritage, migration experience, American culture, and racialization, displaying the strength of its dynamic, dialectical, and nuanced features. Our goal here is to demonstrate the power and versatility of using this reconciliation-themed grammar. What we propose is that this discernment work will occur at the three different levels of theological reflection—the methodological, ecclesial, and personal levels—by Christians of divergent heritages, generations, and situations, as a guide to hear God’s Word clearly and live it out boldly.

In chapter 4, we propose an Asian American ecclesiology, which draws from the christological rubrics and insights of Barth. Barth uses the Chalcedonian categories to evaluate ecclesiological distortions. For example, churches can be docetic and ebionitic, depending on the embodiment of the theological and sociological realities of their communities. We delineate the salient features of Barth’s ecclesiology—for example, the precedence of the theological over the sociological and the ecclesiological movements of gathering, upbuilding, and sending—for the purpose of funding the construction of an Asian American ecclesiology. Then, we evaluate and critique Church Growth ecclesiology and multiracial ecclesiology, both of which have had a significant influence among Asian Americans, using the Chalcedonian categories. We find that both ecclesiologies have fallen into the trap of theological abstraction.

Moving on, Barth’s christological logic and the triadic aspects of gathering, upbuilding, and sending become the building blocks to construct an Asian American ecclesiology. This ecclesiology proposes that Asian American churches be *contextual*, *transitional*, *missional*, and *liberational* communities corresponding to the four aspects of the AAQ.

Finally, the conclusion offers some reflections about the future of Barthian studies and theological contextuality, as well as possible trajectories for further research in Asian American theology.