

**EXPLORING A PARADIGM FOR NEW TESTAMENT THEOLOGY IN AN
ASIAN CONTEXT**

by

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ABSTRACT

TITLE OF THESIS:

EXPLORING A PRADIGM FOR NEW TESTAMENT THEOLOGY IN AN ASIAN CONTEXT

The thesis proposes that developing NT theology for the Asian context is important because of the cultural and multi-religious background of the people. The text of the Bible must be the source of theology and must be applied systematically to the Asian context.

John the Baptist has been instrumental in preparing the way for Jesus Christ. His theological significance needs to be considered at the beginning of NT theology and also in his contribution to the Asian context. Jesus Christ is the center and unity of NT theology. Consideration has been given to the person of Jesus Christ, his mission, his ministry, and the community of his followers. Jesus Christ has been unique in many ways especially when compared to the life and teaching of Buddha.

Key Terms

New Testament theology; Asian theology; Biblical theology; Center and Unity of NT; John the Baptist; Jesus Christ - person, mission, ministry

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Exploring a Paradigm for New Testament Theology in an Asian Context

Introduction

One semester while teaching graduate students a course on "Asian Theology" at Bangkok Bible College & Seminary we discussed the question whether it is necessary in an Asian context to have arguments that prove the existence of God.¹ The students proposed that in Asia people accept the fact that there is a God or many gods. But the real issue is which is the most powerful and supreme being. Is the God of the Bible above all other gods and spirits? How do we experience God in our lives? This discussion showed that doing theology in Asia needs to find answers to problems that are often different from the West.

My burden for developing theology that is relevant for the Asian or Thai context developed out of my experience as a missionary in Thailand. Many times I was confronted with issues such as discussed by the students. I needed to find answers to the questions of Christians and over the years adjusted to the way of thinking in Asia, particularly in Thailand. Another contributing factor to my burden has been the challenge of being involved in theological education at Bangkok Bible College & Seminary for several years. How do we present the Bible to Asian or Thai theological students? How do we teach theology in culturally appropriate ways? These questions are constantly on my mind.

A great challenge in teaching theology in an Asian context is the fact that most of the books we use are in English or translated from English into Thai and, therefore, based on a western world-view and answer the questions of people in a Western context. At our theological institution we have not only recognized the lack of theological literature that meets the needs of the Asian context, but we want to make a contribution to change the situation over the next few years. Hopefully we can encourage Asian scholars to write theology for their own people. My personal desire is not only to describe the problem, but to contribute as much and as best as I can to the development of biblical theology that is relevant for the Asian context.

¹In systematic theology the students were, as commonly taught, introduced to the arguments for the existence of God, such as the teleological, ontological, or moral argument.

Having introduced my personal background for writing this thesis I want to clarify the context or setting that is envisaged. This provides an important basis for the understanding of the material chosen for the thesis.

1. The context or setting for the thesis

Asia is a vast continent with diverse cultures and religious belief systems. There is certainly a need to address issues that are specifically related to the various contexts of the people. This is also true because of the social problems that vary from region to region. Theology that is relevant to the people must be able to address these issues that are predominant in a certain cultural, religious, and social setting. The important issue of contextual theology will be taken up and discussed briefly in the first chapter of the thesis when studying the challenge of developing Asian theology.

The paradigm proposed in chapters two to eight of this thesis are aimed at theological students in an Asian context. Sometimes I refer to Thai theological students because I am involved in their training. I do not always distinguish between the Asian context in general and the setting of Thai theological students. The reason simply is that the topics discussed in the thesis are relevant across Asia. It is an attempt to present the content of the topics in such a way that they fit the Asian context and theological students can identify with them. Some specific applications and references are made to Thai students or people within a Buddhist setting, especially when referring to Buddhism. I am well aware of other religious contexts that could be addressed.

After explaining that the context and setting for the thesis aims at the Asian context in general as well as at Thai students in particular we want to turn now to some of the problems which Asian or Thai students are facing when studying New Testament theology. Some of the problems are related to the nature of the subject and others are related to their cultural upbringing and way of thinking.

2. The dilemma of studying New Testament theology in Asia

New Testament theology exists as a theological discipline for about two hundred years. Many scholars have contributed to the development of this aspect of biblical theology. But Gerhard Hasel observes that in the ten NT theologies published between 1967 and 1976 "no two scholars who produced works agree on the nature,

function, method, and scope of NT theology."² And Donald Guthrie, a scholar who produced an impressive New Testament theology, points to the fact that the variety of the many works on NT theology testifies to "the lack of any general agreement about its nature, and about the aim of anyone attempting to write a NT theology."³ The observations of Hasel and Guthrie present to the student of NT theology an urgent need for a proposal or a concept of NT theology that succeeds in building a consensus among scholars. They also are disturbing and show how difficult it is to present NT theology to Asian students, because they are left with the impression that there are as many approaches to NT theology as there are theologians.

The variety of NT theologies must appear to the Thai students like the offers in a big supermarket. What approach should they choose? Which concept would be suitable for their context? How can they evaluate the various proposals placed before them? Students of theology in Asia are not used to this kind of "theological shopping mentality." They are looking for theological presentations written and presented by trusted teachers who introduce what the Bible teaches. This desire is born out of their cultural upbringing, which places high esteem on the teacher and student relationship. The students prefer answers rather than questions based on the teaching of the Word of God, which are helpful and can be applied in their daily lives. In other words, NT theology for Thai students must be relevant to their context. It must be practical.

Thai students of NT theology face another big obstacle. They only have textbooks at their disposal written by Western scholars that often answer the questions of people who live in a very different context. Some of the writings certainly are helpful and can be used when adapted to the Asian situation, but it would be far better to have theological textbooks written by Asian scholars. So far, no one has attempted to write a comprehensive NT theology with the Asian or Thai context in mind. In fact, this is true for the whole area of biblical theology and other areas of theology as well.⁴ Many scholars have made valuable contributions to highlight the needs and propose solutions for developing theology in an Asian context as well as developing some topics

²Gerhard Hasel, *New Testament Theology: Basic Issues in the Current Debate* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, reprint 1987), 10.

³Donald Guthrie, *New Testament Theology* (Downers Grove: Inter-Varsity Press, 1981), 27.

⁴Donald Stults comments that "a review of the theological literature in Asia reveals that a fully developed evangelical theology has not yet appeared," in *Developing an Asian Evangelical Theology* (Manila: OMF Literature, 1989), 189.

from the Asian point of view.⁵ And yet, the task still remains to write a fully developed theology for the Asian context.

Looking at the situation concerning the study of New Testament theology and knowing the culturally conditioned mind-set of the Asian student, it is obvious that we have to find a paradigm for New Testament theology that fits the Asian context. This leads us to the objectives of the study.

3. The objectives of the study

This thesis attempts to approach NT theology with the Asian context in mind. It is not my aim to describe the problems and what needs to be done to change the situation. As already mentioned, many scholars have provided much helpful material to highlight the seriousness of the problem. My main focus is on a few topics of New Testament theology that need to be presented to theological students and present them in a way acceptable and applicable to the Asian students.

Therefore, the first chapter explores the challenge of developing Asian theology (this includes the Thai context). What are characteristics of a theology that are meaningful in the Asian context? The next chapter studies the meaning and nature of NT theology as part of biblical theology. Does biblical theology meet the needs of Asian Christians? In chapter three a brief survey of the historical development of NT theology should show the students what important theological changes have taken place that are influential today. What lessons can be learned from history? The important issue of the center and unity of NT theology is taken up in chapter four. Does the variety of theologies of each book of the NT fit together? Chapter five explores the theological significance of John the Baptist in preparing the way for Jesus. In what way does his life challenge the Asian Christian community? The focus in chapters six and seven is on the person and ministry of Jesus according to the gospels. Thai students have been converted from a Buddhist background where the founder Gotoma

⁵Just a few examples should be mentioned: Kosuke Koyama, *Waterbuffalo Theology* (London: SCM Press, 1974). He writes for the situation in Thailand. Ro, Bong Rin, Mark C. Albrecht. *God in Asian Contexts: Communicating the God of the Bible in Asia* (Taichung, Taiwan: Asia Theological Association, 1988). Contributions made by several Asian scholars on approaches to different religious and cultural settings. Moonjang Lee, "Identifying an Asian Theology: A methodological quest" in *The Asia Journal of Theology*, 13, No. 2 (1999): 256-275.

(Pali) Siddharta or Buddha (sometimes called 'Lord Buddha') and his teaching play an important role. Therefore, they need to study the life, ministry, and teaching of Jesus in order to understand the differences between Christ and Buddha and also to know the basis of the Christian way of believing. What aspects of the life and ministry are unique? The thesis concludes with a study about the community of Jesus. What is their specific calling and mission?

Through stating the objectives of the thesis it has become clear that the study will present some topics of New Testament theology by bearing the Asian context in mind. It is obvious that the thesis will have limitations which will be shown next.

4. The limitations of the study

Having outlined the scope of this study, I am aware of its shortcomings and limitations. Even though I have lived in Thailand for about twenty years, it has been a challenge to write this thesis bearing the context of Thai students in mind. It is my hope that the study will contribute to the development of biblical theology in Asia and, particularly, in Thailand. I trust that the present Asian scholars and Thai students of theology will take up the challenge and develop a comprehensive NT theology for classroom teaching and for the use of the general Christian public. It is my conviction that the time is ripe for the Thai and Asian theologians to develop theology that meets the needs of their context and answers the questions relevant to their situation.

The thesis will deliberately begin with an introduction to the challenge of developing Asian theology. Before developing a paradigm for New Testament theology we must answer the question: What are some of the important features of Asian theology? In the first chapter we will look at doing theology from an Asian perspective. This explains why most of the quotations are from Asian scholars or sources. We must understand the way Asian scholars are thinking and what they propose as basic foundations for Asian theology. This chapter can be regarded as the basis for the development of biblical or New Testament theology in Asia.

Chapter 1

The Challenge of Developing Asian Theology

For a long time Western Christianity and theology dominated the thinking of the Christians around the world. Theological concepts developed by scholars in the West have been introduced universally. They had defined the basis for the Christian faith once and for all and were simply transplanted into Third World cultures. David Bosch, from a missiological point of view, concludes, "Western theology had *universal* validity, not least since it was the *dominant* theology."⁶ He affirms that there are "universal and context-transcending dimensions of theology," but also supports the need of an "experimental theology in which an ongoing dialogue is taking place between text and context."⁷ In Asia we certainly need more emphasis on this kind of dialogue in order to build bridges between the biblical text and the context of the people. Bosch points out that "contextual theologians rightly refrain from writing "systematic theologies" where everything fits into an all-encompassing and eternally valid system."⁸ Scholars have to be aware that "all theologies are culturally conditioned."⁹

Proposing the development of contextualized theology or theologies should not lead to an "uncritical celebration of an infinite number of contextual and often mutual exclusive theologies."¹⁰ This is one of the problem areas in theology in the West and in the Third World. Scholars often produce theologies that are shaped by their own world-view and theological persuasion rather than expounding the scriptures and doing justice to the text. Contextual theologies should always be aware of the universal and context-transcending dimensions of theology.

Christian leaders from the Third World evaluated western theology during a consultation in Seoul in 1982. They recognized that their understanding of the task of theology had been influenced by the Western approach to theology and the problems

⁶David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (New York: Orbis Books, 1992), 427.

⁷Ibid.

⁸Ibid.

⁹John R. Davis, *Poles Apart?* (Bangkok: Kanok Bannasan, Bangalore: Theological Book Trust, 1993), 13.

¹⁰Bosch, *Ibid.*, 427.

that the Asian church is facing were partly the result of this type of theology. The theologians, often educated in the West, concluded:

Western theology is by and large rationalistic, moulded by Western philosophies, preoccupied with intellectual concerns, especially those having to do with the relationship between faith and reason. All too often, it has reduced the Christian faith to abstract concepts, which may have answered the questions of the past but, which fail to grapple with the issues today. It has consciously been conformed to the secularistic worldview associated with the Enlightenment. Sometimes it has been utilized as a means to justify colonialism, exploitation, and oppression, or it has done little or nothing to change these situations.¹¹

Recognizing the pitfalls of Western theology, the theologians still acknowledged the positive results of the influence of western theology and Christianity "in the birth and growth of churches in many parts of the Third World."¹² It is true that not all problems of the churches can be blamed on Western theology. Nevertheless, theologians from the West should pay attention to the voice and critique of their Third World colleagues. They should learn from them and evaluate their own approach to doing theology.

After looking at the broad picture of developing contextual theology and stating some of the problems proposed by Asian and Third World theologians we will outline the task, the source, the context, the relevance, and impact of Asian theology in its own context.

1. The task of Asian theology

What do we mean by "Asian Theology?" It certainly is not a theological system in addition to other disciplines of theology such as historical, systematic, or pastoral theology. The term "Asian theology" does not carry any nationalistic flavor. In short, it is biblical theology applied to the Asian situation and answers the questions that arise from that particular context. Asian theology is best described by the task it fulfills.

The task of Asian theology is to understand and interpret the Word of God so that it can be appropriated in the light of the Asian historical, cultural, and religious

¹¹"The Seoul Declaration: Toward an Evangelical Theology for the Third World," in Bong Rin Ro & Ruth Eshenauer, ed., *The Bible & Theology in Asian Contexts* (Taichung: Asia Theological Association, 1984), 23.

¹²*Ibid.*, 22-23.

context. Saphir Athyal, a Christian leader from India, proposes: "The task of theology for any people is to articulate their understanding of the eternal truth in terms of their specific locale and context."¹³ This is by no means an easy task. The diligent theologian must know both very well, the text, the context and the interpretation of the Bible and the context and world-view of the people.

The task of theology is first to understand the text, that is: The meaning of God's redemptive activities in the course of biblical history, culminated in the person and work of the God-man Jesus Christ. The text in its own context is the very starting point of any theological pursuit. The essence, uniqueness, and content of the Christian faith lies in the fact that it is historically-based and yet not historically-bound. The bible speaks to every age and every situation directly or indirectly.¹⁴

The diversity of Asian cultures, religions, and problems seems to suggest that only a variety of contextualized theologies can meet the needs of the various contexts. To a certain extent, this certainly is true, for example, when looking at the religious diversity and the needs of people from Hindu, Buddhist, Islamic, or Animistic traditions. At the same time, Asia has "general characteristics and problems, which all Asian theologians must deal with."¹⁵ The danger of relativism and syncretism must be recognized and avoided. The Seoul Declaration provides a framework for the task of Asian theology:

Those of us in Asia will have to grapple with such questions as the resurgence of indigenous religions, the struggle for justice in the face of oppression, totalitarian ideologies and regimes, the tensions between traditional values, corruption, and modern consumerism... The distinctive Asian qualities of spirituality, meditation and devotion, self-sacrifice and servanthood are to be tested and utilized in developing our theology.¹⁶

It has become clear that Asian scholars propose that the task of theology is, first of all, to understand the biblical text in its own setting. The next step is to apply the biblical teaching in relevant ways to the Asian context.

¹³Saphir F. Athyal. "Towards an Asian Christian Theology," in Bong Rin Ro & Ruth Eshenauer, ed., *The Bible & Theology in Asian Contexts*. (Taichung: Asia Theological Association, 1984): 49-61, 50.

¹⁴Wilson W. Chow. "Biblical Foundations for Evangelical Theology in the Third World," in Bong Rin Ro & Ruth Eshenauer, ed., *The Bible & Theology in Asian Contexts*. (Taichung: Asia Theological Association, 1984): 79-92, 84.

¹⁵Stults, *Developing*, 190.

¹⁶Bong Rin Ro, *Bible & Theology*, 25.

Therefore, New Testament theology that is relevant in the Asian multi-religious context must be able to show that Jesus Christ does not just compliment other beliefs and practices. He does not fit into the common categories of a founder of religion. Jesus Christ and his teaching are transforming profoundly the religious experience. He is not introducing a new religion, but he is adding a new dimension to all aspects of life.¹⁷ This is an important task because the Asian people do have their religious traditions and practice them. Christians must be able to show convincingly that their faith in Jesus Christ is not like any other religion.

2. The source of Asian theology

The Seoul Declaration affirmed that the source of theology must be the Word of God: "We have concertedly committed ourselves to building our theology on the inspired and infallible Word of God, under the authority of our Lord Jesus Christ, through the illumination of the Holy Spirit."¹⁸ The reason for this commitment comes from the fact that the subject of theology is God and "we know very little of Him or of Christ through whom we know the Father apart from biblical revelation."¹⁹

It is understandable that Asian theologians are committed to the Word of God as source of theology because they have been converted from a different religious background and know how important the Word of God is for their faith and practice:

The historical character of the Christian faith demands that since the Bible is the unique witness to and the record of this history, it must be the source and provide the content of any Christian theology. Any theology that does not take the biblical record seriously tends to reduce the Christian message to the kind of abstract principles and claims that are found in any non-Christian schools of thought.²⁰

Asian scholars affirm the importance of the Word of God as source of theology and point to a very important aspect, which is often overlooked. They show that there are many similarities between the social and cultural background of the Old and New Testament and the contemporary situation in Asia. "The church in Asia, there-

¹⁷In Thailand people often say that every religion is teaching the same, namely that everybody should be a good person. It is important to help them to understand the difference between Christ and Buddha and the teaching of Christianity and Buddhism.

¹⁸Bong Rin Ro, *Bible & Theology*, 24.

¹⁹*Ibid.*, 51.

²⁰*Ibid.*, 50.

fore, ought to have certain advantages over churches in the West in developing an indigenous theology based on the Bible."²¹ One of the classic examples to demonstrate this closeness between biblical and Asian culture is the teaching of the ten commandments, "Honor your father and mother" (Ex. 20:12, cf. Eph. 6:2). The concept of filial piety in Asian society echoes this commandment and regulates the relationship between parents and children. To honor the parents is part of the Asian culture. Because the parents have invested much energy and resources in bringing up their children, they are expected to express their gratitude towards the parents. Children who neglect their duties towards their parents are regarded as ungrateful. In the West this commandment must be highlighted because of the family situation and an individualistic approach to life.

Asian theologians are convinced that the Word of God must be the foundation and starting point of theology.²² They are as committed as the Reformers who regarded the Bible (*sola scriptura*) the very basis for all biblical studies.

3. The context of Asian theology

Asian theology must address issues that are relevant to the Asian context. Some of them are poverty, suffering, terrorism, demon possession, bribery, idol worship, and the challenge of the religions. How do Christians respond to the needs of the Asian situation? What does the New Testament (or the whole Bible) teach about these issues? Theology must provide answers to real questions of the Asian people. "It is true to say that many of the questions we discuss are simply carried over from Western theological debates."²³

Taking into account the rich cultural heritage of Asia the attitude, of the Western theologian towards the Asian culture is important in developing NT theology (or theology in general). In the past, many mistakes have been made and the cultural background of the people has not been given adequate recognition:

²¹Bong Rin Ro, *Bible & Theology*, 51.

²²Students in our seminary are constantly asking to explain the meaning of a text or biblical term according to the Hebrew or Greek background. They are not used to comparing and evaluating theologies of well-known scholars. The teaching of the Bible is more important to them than some theories developed by theologians.

²³Ken Gnanakan and Sunand Sumithra, "Theology, Theologization, and the Theologian," in *Biblical Theology in Asia*. Ken Gnanakan, ed. (Bangalore: Theological Book Trust, 1995): 39-46, 45.

Modern Protestant missionaries to Asia have generally held that Asian cultures are corrupt and anti-Christian and, therefore, to be neglected if not opposed by Christians. Converts to Christianity were "delivered" from these cultures to live protected in isolated Christian communities. At the same time, Roman Catholic missionaries, by and large, held the classical Romanist view of Christ as being above culture. Only a few missionaries or Asian Christians have seriously applied to Asia Calvin's conviction that Christ has power to transform cultures and social orders."²⁴

NT theology for the Asian context and culture must make clear that Christ transforms culture and does not necessarily oppose all inherited traditions. Those who follow Jesus remain and continue to live in their own culture. They must, however, demonstrate that Jesus has not only transformed their personal lives, but directs them towards their involvement in society.

4. The relevance of Asian theology

Asian theology must be practical and presented in such a way that it can be applied to real life situations. The study of theology cannot just pursue academic or philosophical objectives. "Theology is not valid if it is produced primarily in the study between piles of books. It must be produced in the laboratory of life where it is put to test each day."²⁵ Christians in Asia are challenged constantly about their faith in Christ and why they left the traditional ways of believing. They must be prepared to answer the questions of friends and relatives. Asian theology certainly will give them the foundation to answer their questions. The words of Peter apply to the situation of the Christians, "Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have" (1 Peter 3:15).

Besides having relevance for the personal life, Asian theology must enable the Christians to understand their role in society. Faith in Christ is personal, but never remains private. This truth must still be learned in Asia. Faith in Christ has a social dimension that influences and transforms society.

One of the many challenges in Asia is the social responsibility of the Christians. Social problems reflect the physical and spiritual needs of Asian society. It is beyond the ability of the Asian churches to meet all the needs. Caring for the poor,

²⁴Bong Rin Ro, *Bible & Theology*, 53-54.

²⁵*Ibid.*, 55.

prostitutes, street children, drug addicts can be signs of hope and can lead to an experience of the love of God. Another area of responsibility is the involvement in politics, which many Christians avoid because of the fear that often practices are involved that do not conform to the teaching of the Bible. How can Christians be part in transforming the society? NT theology must certainly play a role in finding answers.

Theology that is committed to the Asian way of thinking builds the church in her witness and mission. In many countries in Asia the Christians are a minority. Asian theology must lead to missions. Wilson W. Chow emphasizes that "we must not divorce missiology from theology."²⁶ The reason for this important focus in theology comes from the fact that Asia still is in the phase of a pre-Christian era, whereas in the West we speak of a post-Christian era.

5. The impact of Asian theology

In Asia many people perceive the Christian church as belonging to the West and not to the East. The "Western character of the church has been the most serious hindrance to the church's witness in Asia."²⁷ Contextual Asian theology must have an impact on all aspects of the life and ministry of the church, such as the way of witnessing to non-Christians and teaching Christians, using forms of worship and church structures that are culturally appropriate. The culturally adapted appearance of Christianity certainly will make the church's witness relevant to the Asian or Thai context and will lead to a change of perception of Christianity and will build bridges into the community.

Contextualized theology also could be used to promote unity among the Christians and to foster cooperation between the denominations. Some of the denominational divisions are imported from the West and "common ground" needs to be discovered in order to meet the challenge of the needs in Asia.

Even though in many countries in Asia Christians are a minority, but theology that focuses on their situation and is culturally relevant certainly will have an impact on surrounding societies.

Another aspect that creates impact on Asian society and Christian community should not be overlooked. Theology that is relevant for Asia must come from men and women who have had a personal encounter with the truth of the Word of God. Out of

²⁶Bong Rin Ro, *The Bible & Theology*, 81.

²⁷*Ibid.*, 57.

this experience they want to make known Christ. In fact, this is not only important for theologians in Asia but for scholars in the West as well.

Ultimately, theologisation in Asia has to do with credibility and creativity that will show from the courage of the theologian who is bold enough to release all of the potential of Christ for our context. But this can only be done when the living power of the Gospel is demonstrated in our lives.²⁸

Theological studies cannot be pursued detached from the life of the theologian. "Theology written by disciples of Jesus Christ will breathe the power that Asia awaits."²⁹ Paul's longing must be the desire of every theologian, "I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection" (Phil. 3:10).

To me, this is the greatest challenge in training theologians in Thailand. The students need to be able to use all the academic tools to study the Word of God and, at the same time, they need to have a personal encounter with the truth.

6. Conclusion

We have studied some important features that constitute theology in an Asian context: It must be based on the Word of God, take into account the context of the people, must be relevant and applicable to real life situations, and must have an impact on the church and society.

The challenge before theologians in Asia is to develop contextualized theologies and to make the biblical teaching relevant for the people:

Asians must write theology for Asia. Asia must develop its own theological masters for the sake of both the Asian church and the whole world church. Asian theologians of an evangelical persuasion must write theology that communicates God's revealed Word in an understandable and compelling way to a multitude of diverse peoples and contexts, while maintaining the universality of the biblical message.³⁰

It is true that Asian theology cannot be developed isolated from the rest of the world. Interaction between theologians from the East and the West is essential. At the same time, Asian scholars are not just at the receiving end, but need to be encouraged

²⁸Gnanakan, *Theology*, 45.

²⁹Ibid.

³⁰Stults, *Developing*, 202.

to express their theological convictions. With their rich cultural heritage they can contribute to doing theology in other parts of the world.

After looking at the challenge of developing Asian theology and the impact it could have in Asia, we must turn to the meaning and nature of New Testament theology as part of biblical theology. The following chapter should answer the questions: Can biblical theology serve as a basis for theology applied to the Asian context? Is it suitable for Asian Christians and does it meet their needs? We want to study, first of all, the meaning and characteristics of biblical theology. Then we will turn to the relation between NT theology and systematic theology, which is an important topic for Thai students.

Chapter 2

The Meaning and Nature of Biblical Theology

Biblical theology originated when "people began to realize that the dogma of the Church was not simply equivalent to the content of the Bible, and tried to distinguish between dogmatic theology and biblical theology."³¹ The emphasis was placed on the term 'biblical'. The context of biblical theology is found in both the Old and the New Testament. It is tragic, however, that theological research has produced theologies that often do not reflect the unity of the OT and NT. They are written as if both have nothing in common or to do with one another. This trend must be reversed. In Asia, we need biblical theology that reflects the continuity and discontinuity between the two testaments.

Biblical theology of the New Testament should bring together the various traditions of the proclamation of faith in the NT. "It is concerned with the theological summation of those 27 books, which the early church elevated to the canon of the New Testament and combined with the Old Testament into the Christian Bible."³² NT theology is not primarily concerned with a history of religion.

There is no generally accepted definition of the meaning, purpose, and scope of biblical theology.³³ It is, nevertheless, important to clarify the meaning of biblical theology because NT theology forms one part of this theological discipline.

1. The term "Biblical Theology" can be used in a twofold sense:

1.1 The term "Biblical Theology" can be used to show that the root of the teaching is the Scriptures (both OT and NT), or that the foundation is based on Scripture, or is in harmony with the Bible. On the basis of Scripture, theological concepts are being formed, often mixed with philosophical ideas. In this definition Biblical theology is regarded as part of theological studies.

³¹Martin Dibelius, "Biblical Theology and the History of Biblical Religion," in *Twentieth Century Theology in the Making*, ed., Jaroslav Pelikan, translated by R. A. Wilson. (London: Fontana Books, New York: Harper & Row, 1969): 23-31.

³²Peter Stuhlmacher, "The Gospel of Reconciliation in Christ - Basic Features and Issues of a Biblical Theology of the New Testament," *HBT*, 1 (1979): 161-190, 161.

³³Charles H. H. Scobie, "The challenge of biblical theology," in *Tyndale Bulletin*, Vol. 42, 1 (1991): 31-61, 31.

We suggest that a Biblical theology is the theology of the Bible as Scripture. Accordingly, its content is determined by the canonical form of Scripture and not by philosophical or theological models of Judeo-Christian thought.³⁴

1.2 The term also can be used to mean the theology, which is derived from the Bible.

It is a theology of the Bible. The teaching of the Bible is studied and presented in a systematic way. The task of the interpreter is to make sure that the theology advocated comes from the Bible and is not interpreted into it. In this conception Biblical theology is regarded as part of biblical studies.

Biblical Theology is that branch of theological science, which deals systematically with the historically conditioned progress of the self-revelation of God as deposited in the Bible.³⁵

We can conclude that biblical theology must come from the Bible itself and lead to application in life. Thai students often refer to the study of Western theology as learning theory, which has not much to do with real life situations. To study and exegete the texts of the Bible or whole books is practical. In Asia, it is important that theology comes from the Bible (or its internal coherence) and is not simply based on isolated texts that support the personal viewpoints and convictions of some commentators, or denominational traditions.

After discussing two definitions we need to look at some characteristics of biblical theology in order to gain a broader understanding of the term.

2. Characteristics of Biblical theology

The following characteristics focus on the most important aspects and are not intended to be comprehensive. I also include supportive quotations from scholars who have written extensively on biblical or New Testament theology.

2.1 Biblical theology intends to examine the teaching of the Bible in its own setting.

"Biblical theology has the task of expounding the theology found in the Bible in its own historical setting, and its own terms, categories, and thought forms."³⁶

³⁴Gerhard F. Hasel, "Biblical Theology: Then, Now, and Tomorrow," in *HBT*, Vol. 4, No. 1, (1982): 61-93: 76-77.

³⁵Charles Caldwell Ryrie, *Biblical Theology of the New Testament* (Chicago: Moody Press, fourth printing, 1968), 12.

³⁶George Eldon Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament* (Cambridge: The Lutterworth Press, 1991), 25.

Biblical teaching must be understood in its own setting before it can be applied to the situation today. It is, however, not just a purely historical study of the Old and New Testament, but a "theological-historical undertaking."³⁷

2.2 Biblical theology pays careful attention to the fact that revelation occurred in history. "Investigation into the lives of the various writers of Scripture, into the historic situation of the recipients of their letters will aid immeasurably our understanding of the doctrine revealed in the words they wrote."³⁸ Biblical theology must take into account God's self-revelation as found in the Scriptures. In fact, it must be sensitive to the transcendent-supernatural dimension and to the spatial-temporal dimension of reality. Hasel shows the tragic development in Biblical theology:

When Johan P. Gabler defined Biblical theology as having "historical character, transmitting what the sacred writers thought about divine matters," Biblical theology soon followed by and large not simply a historical but a historical-critical method, which in the course of time rendered it incapable of affirming the transcendent-supernatural dimension to which the Bible testifies.³⁹

2.3 Biblical theology is concerned with progressive revelation. It takes into account the revelation that unfolded in a long series of successive acts of God in history. "Biblical theology investigates the progress of doctrine, not only as it was revealed by various writers of the Bible, but also in its different stages of development."⁴⁰

2.4 Biblical theology has as its source of doctrine the Bible, the inspired Word of God. It is the authority from which systematic teaching can be drawn. In his influential book "Biblical Theology in Crisis," Brevard Childs proposed a "new Biblical theology."⁴¹ Childs' thesis states "that the canon of the Christian church is the

³⁷Hasel, *New Testament Theology*, 72.

³⁸Ryrie, *Biblical Theology*, 13.

³⁹Hasel, *New Testament Theology*, 73.

⁴⁰Ryrie, *Ibid.*, 13.

⁴¹Brevard S. Childs, *Biblical Theology in Crisis* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1970), 99-

most appropriate context from which to do Biblical theology."⁴² He sees the Scriptures not as archives of the past, but as a channel of life for the church, which God uses to instruct and admonish his people. To use the historical-critical method in interpreting the Scripture and doing theology "would imprison the Bible within the context of the historical past."⁴³ Childs insists that it is fundamental to Biblical theology that the canon of Scripture is *normative*.

2.5 Biblical theology must provide summary interpretations of individual biblical books, or present themes and concepts that emerge from biblical materials with the aim to provide a sure foundation for Christian faith and conduct.⁴⁴

2.6 George Ladd, in his New Testament theology, summarizes the meaning of Biblical theology:

Biblical theology is neither the story of humanity's search for God, nor is it a description of a history of religious experience. Biblical theology is *theology*: it is primarily a story about God and his concern for men. It exists only because of the divine initiative realizing itself in a series of divine acts whose objective is the human redemption. Biblical theology therefore is not exclusively, or even primarily, a system of abstract theological truths. It is basically the description and interpretation of the divine activity within the scene of human history that seeks man's redemption.⁴⁵

The characteristics have made clear that biblical theology is derived from the Bible and leads the believers into the Word of God. It builds the trust of the believer in the revelation of God. Biblical theology traces the divine activity in history, examines the various strands of tradition, and interprets God's revelation in the historical acts.

What then is the difference or relation between biblical NT theology and systematic theology? Theological students have asked this question.

⁴² Childs, *Biblical Theology*, 99.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 100.

⁴⁴ Hasel, *Biblical Theology*, 77.

⁴⁵ Ladd, *New Testament Theology*, 26.

3. The relation between NT theology and systematic theology

There are many similarities between NT theology and systematic theology. Both are based on Scripture and organize the material systematically. And yet, both disciplines are distinct from each other. Systematic theology is a method to systematize the teaching of the entire Bible given on any subject. Biblical theology, and in particular NT theology, intends to discover what the writers of Scripture wanted to convey as teaching to the recipients. The question arises whether NT theology is only descriptive or whether its findings are normative. Guthrie poses the problem very clearly:

If it is regarded as wholly descriptive, it might lead to the position in which the NT theologian is little more than a kind of museum keeper who displays his ancient exhibits to the best possible advantage, but can do nothing to demonstrate their modern relevance.⁴⁶

It is important to maintain that NT theology must be both historically descriptive and also normative from the spiritual point of view. It deals with the basic need of man in his relationship with God as Guthrie states:

It is our contention that NT theology is authoritative and therefore normative in the essentially spiritual area with which it deals... The normative character of NT theology rests with the changelessness of man's basic need for God, but each age must bring its own consciousness of man's basic need to the understanding of the NT.⁴⁷

Systematic and NT theology are complimentary because both are biblical and systematic. In fact, biblical theology is the foundation of systematic theology. "Logically and chronologically Biblical Theology should take precedence over Systematic Theology, for the order of study ought to be introduction, exegesis, historical backgrounds, Biblical Theology, and finally Systematic Theology."⁴⁸

4. Conclusion

From the meaning, characteristics, and relation to systematic theology we can conclude that biblical theology and, in particular, NT theology do meet the basic requirements for a contextualized Asian theology as described in chapter one. The de-

⁴⁶Guthrie, *New Testament Theology*, 32.

⁴⁷*Ibid.*, 33.

⁴⁸Ryrie, *Biblical Theology*, 17.

sire of Asian scholars for a strong biblical basis for theology is certainly the strength of biblical theology.

Biblical theology provides the basis for the Asian scholar to develop a culturally relevant theology, which is derived from the Bible. The teaching needed for the Asian and Thai context can be found in the various types of literature in the New Testament. Biblical theology and, in particular, NT theology, certainly meet needs of Asian Christians because they derive the teaching for the Christian life from a variety of biblical texts and historical accounts that can be applied to the life situation of the Christians.

Gerhard Hasel has outlined in detail the historical development of NT theology.⁴⁹ The historically interested student will certainly benefit from such a study. For the study of NT theology in Asia, however, the historical development is beneficial only in part. The students are often not familiar with the names of theologians from the West. Nevertheless, Asian students must know some developments in order to be able to reflect on their own way of doing theology in order to avoid making the same mistakes.

In chapter three a brief survey of the historical development of NT theology should show what important theological changes have taken place that are influential today not only in the West, but often are exported to Asia as well. What lessons can be learned from history?

⁴⁹Hasel, *New Testament Theology*, 13-71.

Chapter 3

The Historical Development of New Testament Theology

The brief summary of the historical development of NT theology will present only a few observations. The intention is not to provide a comprehensive understanding of the history. It merely shall create awareness of the changes that have taken place, which are still influential today.

1. The period before the Reformation

The early Christian church developed neither a biblical theology nor a NT theology. "The reason was the dictum that the content of the canonical writings, if rightly understood, was identical with the dogma of the church, which was believed to be of universal validity."⁵⁰

The focus of the church before the reformation was wholly upon dogmatics, which was dominated by the traditional teaching of the church. The biblical evidence was used to support the dogmas of the church. At the Council of Trent it became obvious that ecclesiastical traditions were as important as the biblical texts.

2. The Reformation and post-Reformation period

The emphasis of the Reformation on the authority of the biblical text (*sola scriptura*) created an interest in biblical theology. The reformers substituted the authority of the biblical text for the authority of the church. "The belief in the divine origin of the text of Scripture gave all doctrine based upon it the stamp of its own authority."⁵¹ There was no distinction between OT and NT theology at the time of the Reformation. All parts of Scripture were viewed as equally valid for the support of doctrine.

The Reformation, and Protestant orthodoxy, do not know biblical theology as a special discipline. For them, all theology is biblical, and agreement with scripture is the criterion of truth: by reference to scripture it is possible to exclude human additions, and therefore the traditions of Catholic dogma. This presupposes that scripture is clear in itself.⁵²

⁵⁰Hasel, *New Testament Theology*, 14.

⁵¹Guthrie, *Ibid*, 22.

⁵²Hans Conzelmann, *An Outline of the Theology of the New Testament* (London, SCM Press, 1969), 3.

During the post-reformation period, Protestant theology did not develop a teaching on progressive revelation with the result that it led to a view of Scripture as a mine of proof-texts to support doctrinal systems. Another more serious development is the lack of studying the historical background in which the Christian theology developed. "The context of scriptural statements was less important than their content, but exegesis was inevitably dominated by dogmatic considerations."⁵³

3. The age of enlightenment to the present

In 1787 Johann Philipp Gabler (1753-1826) made the most decisive contribution to the development of the biblical theology as purely historical discipline, which is completely independent from dogmatics. Gabler's definition of Biblical theology:

Biblical theology possesses a historical character, transmitting what the sacred writers thought about divine matters; dogmatic theology, on the contrary, possesses a didactic character, teaching what a particular theologian philosophizes about divine matters in accordance to his ability, time, age, place, sect or school, and other similar things.⁵⁴

Hasel⁵⁵ states several influences that marked this totally new approach to the study of the Bible, which emerged during the age of enlightenment:

- (1) Human reason was set up as the final criterion and chief source of knowledge, which meant that the authority of the Bible as the infallible record of divine revelation was rejected.
- (2) The development of a new hermeneutic, the historical-critical method.
- (3) The application of radical literary criticism of the Bible.
- (4) Rationalism was led to abandon the orthodox view of the inspiration of the Bible. The Bible was regarded simply as one of the ancient documents, to be studied as any other ancient document.

These changes had a lasting influence on biblical theology and the study of the Bible in general. Many scholars have developed NT theology from a purely history of religion point of view and turned biblical theology into a descriptive discipline. Many

⁵³Conzelmann, *Outline*, 22.

⁵⁴Quoted in Hasel, *New Testament Theology*, 22-23.

⁵⁵Hasel, *New Testament Theology*, 18-20.

of these influences have reached Asia, but they are not helpful in developing theology for the Asian context.

4. Conclusion

What can Asian students learn from the history of NT theology? First of all, they are affirmed in the importance of the Word of God as basis for NT theology. Secondly, human reason and rationalism should never become the leading source of knowledge in theology. Thirdly, the divine origin of the Scripture must be the foundation for the development of theology.

After introducing the theological student to the historical development of NT theology and its implications for doing theology today we need to turn to the fundamental issue of the center and unity of NT theology. In the West, this has been a controversial issue for a long time. The controversy centers on the starting point. Should anthropology provide the basis for developing NT theology as Bultmann suggests? Should NT theology begin with Christology or focus on salvation-history? It can be observed that the emphasis on what should be the center of NT theology is often influenced by the personal theological persuasion of the scholar.

What is the center of the NT or NT theology? The answer to this question is especially relevant in Asia where the teaching of religions is regarded as centrally important. The followers are required to follow a certain way of teaching in order to achieve the ultimate goal of happiness. What is the role of the founder of the religion? His life functions as exemplary role model that challenges the followers to practice the faith like him. In Buddhism, for example, Buddha and his teaching are regarded as the basis for faith and practice of the followers.

The study of the center and unity of NT theology must provide insights with regard to the person and teaching of Jesus Christ and their centrality of the Christian faith. We must also examine whether the NT consists of many pieces of doctrine that fit together as a united whole. The outcome will determine the presentation of NT theology to Asian Christians.

Chapter 4

The Center and Unity of New Testament Theology

Gerhard Hasel calls the question of the center and unity of the New Testament the "most hotly debated issues in NT studies."⁵⁶ What are the issues related to the question of the center and unity of the NT? (1) The problem of the center of the NT influences the presentation of NT theology on the basis of a single or multiple center. The unity and the center of the NT are interrelated problems. (2) This leads to the important question whether one can find one theology in the NT or a variety and diversity of theologies with no unity.

When comparing earlier dogmatic approaches to NT theology with modern approaches, Donald Guthrie observes:

What stands out is the contrast between earlier unified theology and modern diversity. The older concept of unity was undoubtedly based directly on the view of revelation and inspiration held. If all parts of the literature are equal in value, irrespective of the historical background, unity is assured. Particularly is this the case if the concept of progressive revelation is denied.⁵⁷

The modern diversity observed by Guthrie is the result of some developments in the area of Biblical studies. I just want to focus on one of these influences, namely redaction criticism (*Redaktionsgeschichte*). It is a methodology with the primary focus upon the editorial process of the gospels. According to redaction criticism the gospel accounts are not homogenous compositions but collections of sayings, discourse material, or narratives of events. It is assumed that each evangelist selected material from sources and traditions to support his own theological convictions. The task of redaction criticism is to study the gospels in order to discern the particular literary characteristics as well as the theological viewpoint of each of the evangelists.

The result of this approach has led to a multiplication of theologies. The proponents of redaction criticism see a distinctive theology in each of the gospels, which leads to fragmentation in NT theology rather than to unity. Guthrie states clearly from his observation that redaction criticism has the tendency "to over-emphasize the variety of theologies within the NT at the expense of its unity."⁵⁸

⁵⁶Hasel, *New Testament Theology*, 140.

⁵⁷Guthrie, *New Testament Theology*, 49.

⁵⁸*Ibid.*, 48.

Redaction criticism also fosters the idea that the evangelists could not have been both historians and theologians. Scholars, who have adopted the methodology of redaction criticism, do not have a problem because they have discarded the gospels as historical accounts and regard the evangelists simply as theologians who want to convey a message with the gospel accounts. The evangelists would be taken more seriously if they were regarded as historians and theologians. "The combination of both ensures that theology is based on the history and has not created history."⁵⁹

From the brief description of the methodology of redaction criticism, it has become clear that this approach to NT studies does not ensure unity within the NT. It leads to fragmentation and is, therefore, not the best method as a basis for NT theology.

The scholar of NT theology must make a decisive decision right at the beginning of his study. He must clarify his main objective whether his aim is to display the diversity of the Biblical teaching derived from the collection of disconnected sections of the NT or that he approaches the NT to show that the texts reveal various aspects of a united whole.

1. Variety within the New Testament

There is no doubt that the NT accounts were shaped by the individual author. The question is whether the variety of expression of the writers was inspired in such a way so that their focus was on a coherent center.

The NT teaching is derived from material of different kinds of literature. Each literary form has a specific function and purpose. "It is inevitable that the form in which the teaching is expressed will be influenced by the type of literature in which it occurs."⁶⁰ The distinctive type of literature such as the gospels, acts, the epistles, and the apocalypse convey a particular emphasis of teaching. Does the variety of literary forms mean that there is a variety of teachings or theologies? There is no simple answer to this important question. But the fact remains that the variety of literary forms presents the teaching, each in its particular way. Attention must be paid to the literary form when exegeting a text.

⁵⁹Guthrie, *New Testament Theology*, 49.

⁶⁰*Ibid.*

The NT is not a handbook or presentation of systematic theology. It is the task of the theologian to identify the teaching of the various types of literature, to show that the components are related,⁶¹ and to present the material in such a way so that it can become the basis for Christian living.

Do the different literary forms indicate that there is a development of theology within the NT? With regard to the OT, it is recognized that there is progressive revelation. God revealed himself in many historical events, which led to a deeper understanding of God. Progressive revelation can also be seen in the relation between the OT and NT. The coming of Christ certainly indicates an advance on the revelation of the OT. In the NT we observe a difference between the gospels and the epistles. The disciples did not fully comprehend God's revelation in Jesus Christ before his death on the cross and his resurrection (cf. John 20:9 - even right after the resurrection the disciples did not understand that this event was according to the Scripture and to what Jesus had told them). But in the book of Acts the disciples displayed the conviction that Jesus is alive (cf. the sermon of Peter on the day of Pentecost in Acts 2). It, therefore, can be observed that the understanding of the person of Jesus had been revealed in stages to the disciples. It is important, however, to observe the fact that the disciples did not develop their theology according to their own theological interpretations, but they developed an understanding of the events and teaching of Jesus. They also understood the relation between the OT and the NT in a new way.

To sum up, it can be said that a variety of literary forms are found in the NT with a different emphasis of teaching. All the pieces fit together. We do not find many theologies in the NT, but different stages of understanding of God's revelation.

2. The basis of unity in New Testament theology

Looking through the vast material on NT theology seems to suggest that there is no basis of unity. Even though Brevard Childs observes that "the concern that biblical theology seeks to develop unifying themes between both testaments is frequently

⁶¹Guthrie compares the components with the pieces of a jigsaw puzzle. The pieces are shaped individually, but they, nevertheless, fit together into a united whole. He cannot see the same thing happen in modern approaches and thinks that the situation is more like where several jigsaws are "mixed up together and the various pieces refuse to fit because they do not belong" (New Testament Theology, 50-51).

sounded."⁶² Scholars evaluate former approaches to NT theology and are able to demonstrate their weaknesses, but there are no solid suggestions that are helpful for the future.

Gerhard Hasel examines several approaches that have been used to define a center of NT theology. His contention is that most of the most of the suggestions for a center are not broad or deep enough to serve as an organizing principle. He then concludes:

It has become evident that even the most carefully worked out center whether in the form of a scheme, formula, concept, motif, or idea proves itself finally as one-sided, inadequate, and insufficient and thus inevitably leads to misconceptions as regards the variety, manifoldness, and richness of the NT.⁶³

Hasel's observation helps us to understand why there are so many approaches to NT theology. Each scholar selects one concept or motif, which never encompasses the whole teaching of the NT.

There can be no doubt that the person of Jesus Christ is essential to the understanding of the NT. We are called to believe in Jesus, not just to believe a set of doctrinal statements.

It is not a theological concept that is at the center of the NT, but a person. This same person is portrayed in terms of the theology of each author and his audience, determined by pastoral needs, or the culture of the readers. The gospels clearly show the person and ministry of Jesus. The Acts of the apostles demonstrates how the disciples of Jesus carried on the ministry, which was begun by Jesus. The epistles build on the gospels and elaborate on principles derived from the teaching of Jesus. The book of Revelation rounds up the picture by giving insight into Jesus as the Lord over all and his final victory.

This is different from Buddhism because the center of Buddhism is the teaching of Buddha. He has given doctrinal statements and sayings to follow. Buddha himself was showing the way to go, but he did not expect his followers to focus or depend on him. Every follower of Buddhism must depend on himself and put into practice the teaching. In the development of the Buddhist religion there is certainly a shift from

⁶²Brevard S. Childs, "Some Reflections on the Search for a Biblical Theology," *HTB*, Volume 4, No. 1 (1982): 1-12, 2.

⁶³Hasel, *New Testament Theology*, 163.

this original intention. To some Buddhists today Buddha has become the person they cling to for help.

It is not enough to point to Christology as the basic unity of the NT because theologians have developed several Christologies. Guthrie finds that it is a misleading understanding of the evidence to speak of different Christologies. He rather wants to use the term "various *aspects* of Christology" because "no part of the NT is intelligible apart from the understanding of Christ as portrayed in it."⁶⁴ Guthrie gives a summary why he believes it is logical to have the Christology as the basic unity of the NT:

The variety of ideas about Jesus Christ presents an enriching picture, but all the ideas are concerned about the same person, who lived, died, and rose again. There are different portraits of the same Jesus. Some statements present his messianic office, some his kingly reign, some his lordship, some his humanity, some his creative activity, and many other aspects. NT theology is essentially theology about Christ.⁶⁵

3. Features that underline the importance of Christ as the center of NT theology

3.1 The emphasis on the person and important mission of Christ

The NT does not just draw our attention to Jesus Christ as an important person in his time. He was not just the founder of another religion. We are told that Jesus is relevant to mankind. His saving activity included not only Israel, but was directed towards the whole world. Christ's mission enables man to come into a relationship with God (cf. John 14:6). The story of Jesus cannot just be studied from an anthropological point of view. There must be a theocentric approach and understand the divine initiative behind the reconciliation of the world with God. Often this is referred to as salvation-history (Heilsgeschichte), which takes into account the acts of God in history.

Such an approach is specific enough to make the unity in the NT conceivable and general enough to allow for many variations within the unity. It implies within it the expression of God's activity in the believer in both its individual and corporate aspects, both present and future."⁶⁶

⁶⁴Guthrie, *New Testament Theology*, 54.

⁶⁵*Ibid.*, 55.

⁶⁶*Ibid.*, 54.

3.2 The motive of fulfillment in Christ

The early Christians were convinced that what the OT prophets had predicted has been fulfilled in Christ (cf. Matthew in his gospel shows the fulfillment of OT prophecies). There are numerous allusions to the OT in the NT and the application of OT concepts in the NT (cf. the position of the high priest compared to Jesus Christ in Hebrews and many other concepts).

3.3 The community of those who believe in Christ

Jesus called a group of people "that they might be with him" (Mark 3:14). The disciples were the "first members" of the community of those who followed Christ. Throughout the NT we find the emphasis on the new community of the believers, starting in Jerusalem and spreading to other parts in Asia and Europe. There is the local and the universal dimension of the fellowship of believers. The NT suggests that there was a basic agreement on certain doctrines (cf. Phil 2:5-11 - Christ as an example for the believers). Jesus told those who wanted to follow him and being part of his kingdom that they needed to follow his teaching (cf. Mt 5-7 - Sermon on the Mount).

3.4 The Spirit of Christ who will be with the believers

The Holy Spirit plays an important part in the whole NT. In the narratives of the birth of John and Jesus the Spirit was at work. Throughout the ministry of Jesus the Spirit was involved. Jesus promised the Spirit who will come as a comforter to the disciples. The Spirit will have a teaching ministry. He is also involved in the development of the church. "NT theology is bound together by the bond of the Spirit."⁶⁷

3.5 The future hope of the Christians

The NT testifies to the fact that Jesus will return. It will be a time of joy for those who believe in him, but a time of shame for those who did not accept him and his teaching. "This view that the future holds the key to the present may be said to be a dominant feature of NT belief."⁶⁸

⁶⁷Guthrie, *New Testament Theology*, 56.

⁶⁸*Ibid.*

4. Conclusion

The problem of a center and unity of NT testament theology must be understood from the background of the historical development in NT studies. Many concepts are the product of certain theological or philosophical influences. The personal convictions of NT scholars certainly left marks on the presentation and emphasis of NT theology.

Even though there is a variety of biblical traditions and presentation of teachings, the pieces fit together and are united to a coherent whole. The New Testament itself suggests that the center and unity can be found in the person of Jesus Christ. Therefore, NT theology that is relevant to the Asian context needs to focus on Christ because of the religious plurality found in this part of the world. The people of Asia must be introduced to the person of Jesus Christ so that they can come into a meaningful relationship with him and not just follow certain precepts.

Because Jesus Christ is at the center of the New Testament, the focus of this study is on certain aspects related to the understanding of the person of Jesus Christ. We will begin with a study of the life of John the Baptist who prepared the way for the coming of Jesus Christ. His appearance must be understood as God's intervention in history to prepare for the fulfillment of his eternal plan of salvation. In a sense, John is the link between the old covenant of God with his people and the announcement of the appearance of God's promised "Son of God" to whom he testifies (John 1:32-34). John fulfills a role that is unique and cannot be found in other religions where often the founder relates his coming to a personal experience with nobody preparing the way for him. The founder also does usually not claim to being sent by a supreme being.

John's significance is not only related to his role in the fulfillment of salvation-historical events, but also because of his personal dedication to God. His faith and walk with God can serve as an example and challenge to those who want to follow God in an Asian context.

NT theology must rightly begin with or include John the Baptist because of his significance in God's plan of salvation.

Chapter 5

Between the Times:

The Theological Significance of John the Baptist

All four evangelists associate John the Baptist with the beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ.⁶⁹ John is presented as a significant figure connected with the story of Jesus and as instrumental in preparing the way for him.

John's ministry took place in a sense "between the times." In his manner of life and ministry he displayed the characteristics of an Old Testament prophet and, therefore, he still can be regarded as belonging to the tradition of the great men of God in Israel who delivered God's message to the people. At the same time, his appearance introduced a new phase in the plan of the salvation-history⁷⁰ of God with his people and the world. John, therefore, has a unique position in the New Testament.

What caused the people at that time to flock to John at a remote place in the Jordan valley? Why were the Jews stirred up by John's message of repentance? What is the relationship between John and Jesus? What is the theological significance of John? These are just a few questions that call for an answer.

I intend to examine the life of John according to the accounts presented to us in the gospels. The four evangelists certainly portray John according to their own purpose of writing, but they agree that John the Baptist is a significant figure.⁷¹ We, therefore, must pay attention to John's life and ministry and examine it in the light of his theological significance as part of the New Testament theology. I am aware that it will not be possible to address and discuss all the critical questions related to the study of the life of John.

The study of the life of John the Baptist is of great interest from the Thai or Asian point of view. The detailed accounts about his family background, the super-

⁶⁹Prior to the accounts of Jesus' ministry all four gospels have a summary of the events of John's life cf. Mt 3:1-12, Mk 1:2-8, Lk 3:1-20, Joh 1:6-8.19-28; 3:23-30. In Acts we find that Peter and Paul begin their message about Jesus with a reference to the baptism of John (Acts 10:38; 13:24-25). Also, the apostle to replace Judas was expected to know John and Jesus (Acts 1:21-22).

⁷⁰Leonard Goppelt explains that "salvation history refers to a succession of historical events that finally can be distinguished and linked together in no other way than that they prepared the way for God's conclusive disclosure of himself in Jesus, and that Jesus himself identified with them fundamentally in that sense. In this way, Jesus cast his lot in a "salvation-historical" sense with John the Baptist." (Theology of the New Testament, Vol. I, 31).

⁷¹The Name of John the Baptist appears about ninety times in the Gospels and Acts.

natural influences before his birth, the way he lived, his religious significance, and his impact on society portray John as a "dedicated religious teacher and leader." Religious people like John are highly esteemed in Asia.

1. The historical setting

The historical setting provides the background of the influence of the message of John the Baptist. His appearance and his challenging words were timely and caused an overwhelming response. It is, therefore, important to look briefly at the political and religious situation at that time.

1.1 The political situation

Rome occupied Palestine at the time when John appeared on the scene. The Romans, however, allowed the rule of a Jewish government (e.g. Herod had some limited power) that coexisted with the occupying forces and handled many of their own religious and domestic affairs. The Sanhedrin was the Jewish supreme court.

The Romans did not trust the Jews completely. The reason was simply that the Jewish people never accepted the occupation of their territory and in various rebellions people had fought against the Roman forces (cf. Acts 5:36-37 where the revolts of Theudas and of Judas the Galilean are mentioned). The motivations behind the revolts were both political and religious. George Ladd, in his New Testament theology, summarizes the political situation and writes:

To strike a blow against Rome meant to strike a blow for the Kingdom of God. Again and again, large groups of people took up arms, not merely in the interest of national independence, but to achieve the Kingdom of God, that God alone rather than Rome might reign over his people.⁷²

The challenge of the occupation by Rome cannot be underestimated because in Jewish thinking the influence of their religion was not limited to the personal life only, but also to the governing of the country. God was the supreme ruler and king of the Jewish community and nation. But the Romans were worshipping many deities, which was incompatible with the Jewish belief in one supreme God (Deut 6:4). The Romans were Gentiles and the Jews were the chosen people of God (cf. Deut 14:1).

⁷²George Eldon Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, revised edition, edited by Donald A. Hagner, 1993), 32.

There was a strong hope in Palestine that God would establish his kingdom in a very real sense (cf. Acts 1:6 the disciples asked Jesus before his ascension when Jesus is going to restore the kingdom of Israel). Some Jews expected a Messianic figure to come and retake the promised land by force and bring an end to the occupation. Therefore, the appearance of John nurtured this hope.

1. 2 The religious situation

The political situation in Palestine certainly influenced the religious environment and expectations. With regard to the religious situation in Israel, several factors prepared the people for the ministry of John the Baptist and also for the appearance of Jesus Christ.

First of all, for a long period of time the living voice of the prophets had not been heard in Israel. No written accounts of their message had been produced. At least, we do not have any written messages of prophets in the Old Testament added after Malachi. In fact, it seems that for about four hundred years God was silent, often referred to as the "silent years."⁷³ Ladd characterizes this period as follows:

No longer did God speak directly through a human voice to his people to declare his will, to interpret the reason for the oppression of Israel by the Gentiles, to condemn their sins, to call for national repentance, to assure judgment if repentance was not given and to promise deliverance when the nation responded.⁷⁴

The absence of the spoken prophetic word and the emphasis on the written accounts of the prophets created the understanding that the prophetic gift would be revived again, but it belonged to the end of the days. Oscar Cullmann concludes "everywhere in Judaism at this period the hope of the end was united with the expectation of the revival of prophecy."⁷⁵ Cullmann also convincingly showed that the expecta-

⁷³Even though we do not have written accounts during this period in the OT, it does not mean that God was silent. We know of another period in Israel's history when God seemed to be silent for a long time (Acts 7:6, Ex 12:40). But God knew about the suffering of his people and he provided Moses to lead them out of Egypt (Ex 3:7-10). It seems to me an interesting parallel because it shows that God knows the situation of his people even though he does not act immediately. At the appointed time, God will send his messenger.

⁷⁴Ladd, *New Testament Theology*, 31.

⁷⁵Oscar Cullmann, *The Christology of the New Testament* (Revised Edition, trans. by Shirley C. Guthrie and Charles A. M. Hall, Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1963), 22.

tion of an eschatological prophet was widespread beyond Judaism, for instance, among the Samaritans and the people of Qumran.⁷⁶

Secondly, how did the people learn about the will of God? They learned about it by interpreting the written accounts. Instead of the direct word from God through the prophets, the scribes interpreted the will of God in terms of obedience to the written Law. The interpretation of the Law was entirely entrusted to the "religious specialists" who placed the main emphasis on what God had revealed already.

Thirdly, another stream of religious influence appeared during that time. The apocalyptists wrote extensively about the coming eschatological deliverance. But they did not move among the people as heralds of salvation like prophets. "There is also no evidence that their writings created popular eschatological movements among the people, stirring them to expect the imminent intervention of God to bring his Kingdom."⁷⁷ Even though the influence of the apocalyptic writings was limited, yet they created an eschatological expectancy to a certain extent.

Fourthly, the Qumran community was an eschatological movement and looked for an apocalyptic consummation, but they withdrew into wilderness. They left the community in order to live for their religious ideals. They did not prepare the people of Israel for the end, but spent the time among their own people in the desert in order to obey the Law of God and to await the coming of God's kingdom. The Qumran community was a legalistic movement that interpreted the Old Testament, but did not have a prophetic word for the Jewish community.

Fifthly, there was a faithful remnant that waited for a new divine intervention in history. Simeon belonged to this group of believers (Luke 2:25-35). He was "waiting for the consolation of Israel." Another person is mentioned in Luke's gospel. Anna was very old, but she did not give up the hope of God's redemption of Israel. She spent her time in the temple to worship, to fast and to pray. She "gave thanks to God and spoke about the child to all who were looking forward to the redemption of Jerusalem" (Luke 2:38). Simeon and Anna sensed that in the little child that Joseph and Mary had brought to the temple was the fulfillment of their hope. In fact, they were not the only ones who were waiting. There must have been a growing eschatological expectation among the religious people in Israel.

⁷⁶Cullmann, *Christology*, 19-22.

⁷⁷Ladd, *New Testament Theology*, 32.

Bearing the political and religious situation in mind will help us to understand the historical significance of the appearance of John. In terms of Christian tradition, he came to announce that the kingdom of God is near to a people who felt that God had become silent and who were oppressed under the rule of a pagan nation. John's message found the ear of the people because they felt God was speaking through him, like in the days of the prophets. This is the reason why John immediately created an interest in the people. They came to see him and they responded to his message. The time was ripe for the appearance of John the Baptist, preparing the way for an even greater event: the coming of the Messiah.

2. The formation of John the Baptist

Only Luke begins his gospel with a narrative giving us the background of the preparation and formation of John the Baptist as the forerunner of Jesus Christ. Questions have been raised as to the source of Luke's narrative (this applies for the accounts of the background and the birth of both, John and of Jesus). Also the historical reliability has been debated (did Luke create the events in order to convey teaching or theological insights?). And the discussion among scholars centers around questions in view of the miraculous signs associated with the birth of John (can the miraculous events be taken literally?).⁷⁸ Howard Marshall concludes the discussion on Luke's sources and the historicity of the events as follows:

It appears most probable that Luke had sources at his disposal, and that these came from Palestinian Jewish Christian circles, which had links with the family of Jesus. The view that these sources were independent of one another is not entirely convincing. But beyond this it is difficult to go, and we must be content to keep an open mind on the problem of Luke's sources and hence on the historicity of the events recorded in them.⁷⁹

Luke certainly must have had sources at his disposal, which we do not possess today (cf. in Luke 1:1-4 Luke tells us that he carefully investigated about the events), but he must have regarded them as historically reliable. It is important to recognize

⁷⁸I. Howard Marshall, *The Gospel of Luke: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (Exeter: The Paternoster Press, 1978), 45. Marshall summarizes the various positions, which I will not discuss in this paper (pp. 45-49).

⁷⁹*Ibid.*, 49.

the limitations in exploring the sources of Luke's accounts from the present perspective. Luke was much closer to the events and sources than the scholars today.

The narrative of the announcement and birth of John is told by Luke to show that God initiated the events. God revealed his plan and the future role of John through an angel.

2.1 John's family background

The formation of a person begins in the family. The circumstances of the birth and the family background shape the value system, the outlook on life, and the religious convictions of a person. This also is certainly true in the life of John the Baptist.

Luke tells us that John was born into a devout priestly family. Zechariah belonged to the priestly division of Abjiah and was still performing his duties in the temple at Jerusalem when John was born. Elizabeth was a descendant of Aaron (Luke 1:5). They lived in the hills of Judea (Luke 1:39).

John's parents were both following the Jewish traditions. "Both of them were upright in the sight of God, observing all the Lord's commandments and regulations blamelessly" (Luke 1:6). Their religious life and their ethical character reflected their faith in God. It is important that the parents led exemplary lives because this must have shaped the value system of John.

Zechariah and Elizabeth are portrayed in their dedication to God as blameless in order to show that their childlessness is not a result of sin in their lives (cf. Lev 20:20-21, Jer. 22:30).

Zechariah and Elizabeth were well advanced in age (Luke 1:7 "they were both well along in years"). The couple had no children. This certainly must have been difficult to accept for them because it looked as if they were lacking the divine blessing in spite of their godly lives. To have children was a sign of God's blessing (Psalm 127:3-5; 128:1-6). To be childless was seen as disgrace. Elizabeth expresses this when she praised the Lord after she became pregnant and said, "In these days he has shown me favor and taken away my disgrace among the people" (Luke 1:25). It is impressive to observe that Zechariah and Elizabeth did not waiver in their faith in God even though the expectations of having a child had not been fulfilled for a long time. They might have given up the hope of this blessing, but the lack of a child did not affect

their dedication to God. There can be no doubt that their dedication to God had an influence on John.

Elizabeth, the mother of John, was related to Mary, the mother of Jesus (Luke 1:36.39-45). The Greek term *sungenis* (συγγενίς) could refer to an aunt or cousin or simply a female relative. Even though John and Jesus grew up in different places, they might have seen each other when they were quite young.

John grew up with his parents. "And the child grew and became strong in spirit" (Luke 1:80). John undergoes normal growth until he reaches maturity. In his summary statement, Luke does not give us any hint as to the number of years John spent with his parents. If John had been with his parents for some years, then he must have received the teaching in the OT law according to Jewish custom (cf. Deut 6:6-7; 11:18-20). He must have known the ways of God with the people of Israel. His parents must have told him about the miraculous events surrounding his birth and the words of God's messenger revealing the plan for his life.

The family background of John is significant because it certainly influenced the course of his life.

2.2 The divine perspective of John's birth

In his dramatic narrative Luke wants to show very clearly that behind the birth of John was divine intervention and divine intention. This is an important aspect in the formation of John. His ministry cannot be understood apart from God's work in his life from the very beginning, even before John was born. But it is not just a story about an individual servant of God. Through divine intervention and the miraculous birth of John the salvation-history of God with mankind was ushered into a new phase. Only those who believe that God is not a projection of man but a reality can understand this. God takes the initiative and makes clear that he is interested in the affairs of this world and, in particular, in his people.

While Zechariah was on his priestly duty an angel of the Lord appeared to him (Luke 1:11-13). This must not have been a common experience of a priest while performing his duty in the temple. Seeing the angel Zechariah was "startled and was gripped with fear." After a word of comfort ("do not be afraid") the angel told Zechariah about the reason for his appearance: the prayer of Zechariah has been heard. Elizabeth will bear a son and the name of the child will be John. We are not

told how long Zechariah prayed to God and asked him for a child (it could have been for many years). But the angel made it very clear that God listened to his prayer all the time. He was not as inactive as it seemed. The answer to his prayer came at the appointed time of God.

Zechariah's reaction is significant, "How can I be sure of this? I am an old man and my wife is well along in years" (Luke 1:18). He wanted some kind of confirmation that he was not dreaming, but he experienced a true encounter with a messenger from God. Zechariah received a sign, which he might not have expected. He could not speak until the words of the angel were fulfilled (Luke 1:20.64).

The people who came to the temple that day and were waiting for Zechariah witnessed that he was not able to speak. They concluded that he must have seen a vision while he was in the temple.⁸⁰

The angel gave a clear description of what John's life and ministry will be like (Luke 1:14-17):

1. God will look favorably on him ("he will be great in the sight of the Lord").
2. His life-style will reflect his dedication to God ("he is never to take wine or other fermented drink"). He will be like the Nasirite of the OT times (Numbers 6:1-4).
3. John will have God's presence and the power of the Holy Spirit ("he will be filled with the Holy Spirit even from birth").
4. Through John many people will turn to God ("many of the people of Israel will he bring back to the Lord their God").
5. John will prepare the people for the Lord in the spirit and power of Elijah. ("And he will go on before the Lord, in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the fathers to their children and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous-- to make ready a people prepared for the Lord").

It is important to note that the angel revealed God's plan and purpose for John's life. From a human point of view Zechariah might have chosen a different path for this son, given to him as an heir when he was old. John also did not create his own job description. He did not preach his own message. He needed to learn about God's intention for his life.

⁸⁰Luke must have found people who were a reliable source of this incident when collecting the material for his gospel. The people were talking about the events (Luke 1:65).

As soon as Zechariah was able to speak after John's birth he was praising God. In his praise, Zechariah expressed the hope to be fulfilled in what God had begun to do for his people. He also repeats the plan for John (Luke 1:67-79) and how God will use him as a blessing to Israel.

The timing of John's birth (in the same way the birth of Jesus) was not just a clever presentation of Luke, but a historical event initiated by God with a certain divine purpose.

2.3 John's years in the wilderness

John undergoes normal physical growth to maturity and also becomes strong in spirit (Luke 1:80, cf. similar to the growth of Jesus in Luke 2:40). "The reference is to his human personality, but there may be a suggestion that such growth was due to the hand of God."⁸¹ There is no account of any extraordinary events in the life of John while growing up. We do not know if John's parents died when he was very young, as some scholars suggest.

Luke tells us that John "lived in the desert until he appeared publicly to Israel" (Luke 1:80). This statement has puzzled many scholars. Why was John in the wilderness? For how long was he there? The New Testament does not give an answer to these questions. In the nineteenth century scholars linked John with the Essenes in the Jordan area and later some even argued that John was a member of the Qumran community. Several considerations have led scholars to believe that John was connected with Qumran, maybe from an early age:

1. The Qumran community had priestly connections and also was interested in priestly matters. John came from priestly parents. They might have passed away when he was very young, because they were old when John was born. The Qumran community frequently adopted orphans and, therefore, John might have grown up among them.

There is, however, no evidence, either in the New Testament or in the ancient literature, including the texts from Qumran, that mentions John as a member of the community. When John is first mentioned in the gospels he is not, or no longer part of the Qumran community.

⁸¹I. Howard Marshall, *Commentary on Luke*, New International Greek Testament Commentary, ed. I. Howard Marshall and W. Ward Gasque (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, reprinted 1979), 95.

2. The place of John's ministry in the Jordan valley was close to Qumran. This does not necessarily suggest that he was a member of the community. It is possible that John was acquainted with the teaching and community of Qumran. This does not mean that he was a member of the community.
3. The gospel accounts introduce John by using Isaiah 40:3 (cf. Mk 1:2), which was also an important text at Qumran.
4. John's ascetic life style is often seen as identification with Qumran because of the Damascus Rule 12.13-14 that specifies how to eat honey and locusts. John's diet was not anything special in those days. It was something that would be expected of an itinerant preacher in the wilderness.
5. John's baptism or water rite was similar to the Qumran ablution rites.
6. John's message was eschatological in orientation. He emphasized the coming judgement of God on Israel. This has parallels to teaching in Qumran.

Even though there are similarities between John and the Qumran community, it is difficult to maintain that John was a member of the community. He almost certainly must have known of the existence of Qumran and, to a certain extent, might have been influenced by it. But "it is certainly not possible to show that John was a member of the Qumran colony, but there are reasons to believe in some contacts between him and the Essenes."⁸²

3. The ministry of John

John the Baptist began his ministry in the fifteenth year of the reign of emperor Tiberius (Luke 3:1), which corresponds to A.D. 28 (or maybe A.D. 26-27).

3.1 His calling

John did not appoint himself to be a servant of God. He appeared because of God's calling. John responded to the word of God. He did not serve God just because of his godly parents. His call to ministry is described as similar to that of the OT prophets "the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the desert" (Luke 3:2). God calls a certain person at a certain time for a certain task. John remained in the wilderness till

⁸²Bo Reicke, "The Historical Setting of John's Baptism," in *Jesus, the Gospels, and the Church*, ed. E. P. Sanders (Macon: Mercer University Press, 1987), 214.

God called him. There is no indication in the NT what John did and experienced during his time in the desert. He was there "until he appeared publicly to Israel" (Luke 1:80). The term "appeared publicly" in Greek *anadeiksis* can be translated 'commissioning or installation' (cf. Luke 10:1). John, therefore, seems to have spent time in the presence of God until he was commissioned for his task. The word of God had come to John and gave him the prophetic authority.

Apparently news of this appearance of a new prophet spread like wildfire throughout Judea and moved throngs of people to flock to the Jordan River where he was preaching (Mark 1:5) to listen to his message and submit to his demands. At long last, God had raised up a prophet to declare the divine will (Mk. 11:32, Mt. 14:5).⁸³

The outward appearance of John - his clothes made of camel's hair, the leather belt - "appears to be a deliberate imitation of the external marks of a prophet (cf. Zech. 13:4, II Kings 1:8 LXX)."⁸⁴

The task John was called to fulfill was clear and, therefore, he did not want to be someone else (John 1:19-28, Acts 13:24-25).

With regard to the place of John's ministry we have to look to Southern Judea and the Jordan valley. John's gospel mentions two locations, Bethany (John 1:28) and Aenon near Salim (John 3:23). Both places cannot be identified with certainty. According to Mark's account, John began his ministry in the desert (Mark 1:4) and Matthew also affirms that Jesus preached there (Mt. 3:1).

3.2 His message

More important than the place or places of John's ministry is the content of his message to the people.

3.2.1 Proclaiming judgment

John announced the coming of the Messianic age. He made it very clear that this was not the time of the deliverance from the foreign and pagan oppressors, but it was to be a day of judgment for Israel (Mt. 3:7-12, Lk. 3:7-18). The judgment is described as

⁸³Ladd, *New Testament Theology*, 36.

⁸⁴*Ibid.*, 35.

baptism of fire, the clearing of the threshing floor, and the axe at the root of the tree ready to cut down. These vivid pictures show the severity of the judgment.

There is no escape from this judgment as John pointed out to the Pharisees and Sadducees: "Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath?" (Mt. 3:7). The coming of God's kingdom will bring separation: some will be gathered like wheat into the barn, others will face destruction like burning up chaff. The fire is described as unquenchable, which points to an eschatological judgment (cf. Isa. 1:31; 66:24, Jer. 7:20).

The standard for judgment is the lack of fruit. Fruitless trees will be cut down and thrown into the fire (Mt. 3:7-10, Lk. 3:7-9). This announcement is very drastic because in Palestine unfruitful trees would normally not be destroyed by burning. The trees would be saved so that the wood might be used for domestic purposes. God expects his people to bear fruit, but the lack of it will bring judgment.

The judge is not going to inquire about achievements, but about good fruits. Fruit is the demonstration of what is within a person. Good fruit is that conduct through which people live up to the intention of God for mankind. Who can manifest such fruit? Apparently no one!⁸⁵

John's stern warning of the judgment must have caused the people to seek forgiveness and restoration.

3.2.2 Calling to repentance

John not only pronounces judgment, but he calls the people to repentance. "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near" (Mt. 3:2) was the call at the beginning of his ministry. John's task was to prepare the people for the coming of the Messiah. The obstacle of sin and a fruitless life must be removed. The unfruitful tree must be transformed into a fruitful one.

Repentance, according to the Greek noun *metanoia* or the verb *metanoiein*, suggests a change of mind. In the gospels, however, the meaning is determined by the equivalent Hebrew term *shub*, which means, "to turn around" and sees the entire person moving into a changed direction. It is a turning from sin to God. "*Metanoiein* always means to alter not only views but conduct, and that in the sense of alteration of

⁸⁵Goppelt, *New Testament Theology*, 33.

conduct in relationship to God."⁸⁶ It involves the turning around of the whole person toward God.

The cutting edge of John's call to repentance is the expected fruit shown in the life of the one who repents. "Produce fruit in keeping with repentance" (Mt. 3:8) is the challenge of John. Luke gives illustrations of the changed life John demanded (Lk. 3:10-14). Those who have abundance of possessions are being told to share and help those in need. Tax collectors were advised not to collect more money than required. Soldiers were told to be content with their wages and not to use improper means to extort money.

3.2.3 Pointing to the coming One

Right from the beginning of John's ministry he made very clear that he was a "voice calling in the desert" to prepare the way of the Lord. People wondered whether John was the expected Christ (Lk. 3:15). Whole parties of priests, Levites, and Pharisees investigated about who he was (John 1:19-28). John himself did not claim to be any of the important figures to be expected in the Messianic age. He knew that he was sent ahead of the one more powerful than he was. His main task was to point to him (Mt. 3:11, Mk. 1:7, Lk. 3:16, John 1:28).

John's message was timely. People were prepared to receive it. The presentation of the gospel was done in such a way that it pierced the heart of the people and they responded (cf. also Acts 2:37-38 where people responded to Peter's message). They responded to his call for repentance. His message got to the heart of the people. What is a relevant message for the people today?

3.3 His baptism

The rite of baptism was an essential part of John's ministry. It gave him the distinctive title "the Baptist" (*ho baptistes*). John preached "a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins" (Mk. 1:4, par. Lk. 3:3). The baptism was a sign of the forgiving gift of God. The people who came to John were ready to repent (Mk. 1:5) and received the assurance of forgiveness through the water baptism.

It seems best to understand John's baptism on the background of the Old Testament ceremonial lustrations. The priests were required to cleanse themselves in

⁸⁶Goppelt, *New Testament Theology*, 34.

preparation for their ministry and the people of Israel needed to observe washings on various occasions (Lev. 11-15, Numbers 19). The prophets exhorted the people to receive moral cleansing under the figure of cleansing with water (Isa. 1:16ff, Jer. 4:14).

A true cleansing by God was expected in the last days (Ezek. 36:25-26, Jer. 33:8, Zech. 13:1). God promised in Ezek. 36 that he will "sprinkle clean water upon you and you will be clean ... I will put my Spirit in you." John offered in his baptism the first part of God's promise, the cleansing through water. The renewing Spirit will be given by the One to come (cf. Mt. 3:11).

3.4 His community of disciples

Multitudes of people came to see John. He ministered to them in their specific needs. At the same time an inner circle of disciples developed. They would receive special instructions and formed the core group that eventually some of the disciples of Jesus were drawn from.

3.4.1 Their training

John's ministry attracted many people. It must have been natural to have a group of followers who received special training. John must have trained his disciples in certain areas because in Luke 11:1 we read that the disciples of Jesus asked him to teach them how to pray "just as John taught his disciples." We are told that John's disciples fasted regularly (Mt. 9:14, Mk. 2:18).

3.4.2 Their loyalty

John's disciples were loyal and committed. They were concerned that Jesus' popularity would overshadow John (John 3:26). When John was imprisoned they were attending to his needs and showed their loyalty in the treatment of his body after his death (Mk. 6:29).

John's ministry was extensive and his influence lasting. This can be seen in fact that twenty years after his death Paul found disciples in Ephesus. They just knew about the baptism of John (Acts 18:25; 19:4).

To this day there is a small sect called the Mandaeans in parts of Iraq and Iran who claim to have kept the traditions of John. The Mandaean literature dates back to the eighth century. It is doubtful if it helps to discern anything about the historical John the Baptist.

4. His death

The exact time of John's imprisonment and also the exact period of time he spent in prison till his death cannot be determined. Jesus refers to the witness of John as already past on the occasion of an unnamed feast (John 5:1.33-36). The arrest of John or may be his death must have taken place before that incident.

The reason for John's imprisonment according to the Gospel accounts was the reproof of Herod's marriage with Herodias, the wife of his brother Philip (Lk 3:19-20, Mt 14:1.3, Mk 6:17-18). The Gospel tradition and Josephus (*Ant.* 18.5.2) agree that John lost his life because of Herod Antipas, the ruler of Galilee and Perea.

5. The significance of John the Baptist

The significance of John the Baptist is most prominently seen in his relationship to Jesus and in what Jesus said about John.

Right from the beginning John assumed that his role was to prepare the way for the approaching Messianic age. He was certain of his divine appointment for the ministry (John 1:33). John was well aware of his subordinate relation to Jesus (Mk. 1:7) and of the temporary character of his ministry (John 3:30).

Jesus visited John the Baptist at the place where many people gathered to receive baptism. It is clear, according to the synoptic gospels, that John baptized Jesus (Mt 3:16, Mk 1:9, Lk 3:21). The fourth Gospel does not mention the actual baptism of Jesus, but the observation is recorded that the Spirit came upon Jesus (John 1:32). John, the evangelist, certainly knew that John had baptized Jesus.

John the Baptist identified Jesus as the Lamb of God, which brings the forgiveness of sin (John 1:29). In witnessing the coming of the Spirit on Jesus like a dove (John 1:32) John indicates that Christ will bring the baptism in the Spirit (John 1:33).

The strong testimony of John concerning Jesus must have come from a deep conviction that he was the Christ who was sent by God. Had John lost his faith in the Messiahship of Jesus when he was in prison? When he heard what Christ was doing, he sent his disciples to ask him, "Are you the one who was to come, or should we expect someone else?" (Mt 11:2-3). The disciples were told to report to John what they hear and see what Jesus was doing. What caused John to raise his question? He had proclaimed that the one coming after him would do greater things than he did. The

Messianic age would bring both blessings and judgement. John's impression must have been that Jesus is not using his Messianic authority.

The expectations of Jesus and what he actually did caused a great deal of perplexity in John. His concern was whether Jesus was able to fulfill the promises given about his life and ministry. John needed to readjust his view of the coming Messianic kingdom.

Jesus showed his appreciation of John and called him a shining light (John 5:35), more than a prophet (Mt. 11:9). After John was imprisoned, Jesus in Mt. 11:2-19 explains the significance of John's ministry.

Jesus recognized in John the great eschatological prophet. He thought of John as the Elijah *redivivus*. The quotation of Malachi 3:1 in Matthew 11:10 confirms the viewpoint of Jesus.

There is a close relationship between Jesus and John. At the same time, Jesus' ministry was different. John prepared the way for the one to come. Jesus, on the other hand, did not expect a successor to follow him. Jesus contrasts his and John's ministry (Mt 11:18-19, Lk 7:33-34), both of them suffered rejection.

6. Insights to consider in an Asian context

There are several interesting insights from the life and ministry of John that could be relevant to consider in an Asian context. They can provide the basis for further investigation. A more comprehensive study would reveal more insights.

6.1 The religious and political setting in many countries in Asia makes it difficult for people to believe in Jesus Christ. Often there is pressure from family and society to conform to the inherited way of life and religious convictions. Corporate opinions and decisions often bind the individual so that he is not free to decide according to his own desire.

Many people came to John. A whole movement came into being and the desire to be right with God brought people to see John. Could this happen in Asia that instead of individuals becoming Christians, but groups of people and families decide to believe in God?

6.2 In John's time, people responded to his call to repentance. He spoke to the needs of the people. How can the gospel be meaningful to the people in Asia and be proclaimed in such a way that the message strikes a cord in their hearts and they re-

spond and believe? The content of the gospel message does not change, but the application in a certain context must meet the needs of the people.

- 6.3 The background of John's life shows the importance of the family and the influence parents have in shaping the value system of the children. The family in Asia is an important unit in society. Filial piety is highly esteemed. Caring for each other still is part of family life. Christians need to strengthen the family in Asia.
- 6.4 John had a clear calling to ministry. Many (esp. young Christians) struggle with the question whether God has called them to serve him. John did not appoint himself to the task he was to fulfill. It is equally important that those who serve God develop a Christ-like character and practice what they believe. The personal life and service for God must not be separated. This is very important in an Asian context where the integrity of those who teach the Word of God supports the acceptance of the teaching.
- 6.5 John had a sense of fulfilling his role to prepare the way for Jesus. He understood his specific call to a certain ministry. He pointed to Christ and, in a sense, built a bridge for the coming of Jesus Christ. How can Asian Christians build bridges to their non-Christian environment in order to prepare the way for the message of Jesus Christ?

7. Conclusion

John had an important role to fulfill. God's assignment for him and his willingness to accept the calling made him an outstanding servant of God. His dedication challenges all those who want to serve God.

John was used in preparing the way for the most important event in history: the coming of Jesus Christ, the Savior of the world.

In chapter four on the center and unity of NT theology we concluded that Jesus Christ should be regarded as the center of the NT. Therefore, the study of NT theology must focus on the person of Jesus Christ. Chapter six should answer the question: Who is Jesus Christ? In an Asian setting it is important to understand who Jesus is because founders of religions have left their footprints in Asian soil.

Only some aspects of the person of Jesus Christ that are especially relevant to Asian students or Christians have been selected.

Chapter 6

The Person of Jesus Christ

Christology is at the center of the New Testament. Beginning with the gospels right through to the book of Revelation, Christ is presented in his relevance for the individual believer and the Christian community as well as for all of mankind and the world. As we have seen earlier in our study, the person of Jesus Christ is at the center of the New Testament. Therefore, Christology must be the starting point of NT theology.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer proposes that the question 'Who is Jesus?' is the only appropriate question in Christology.⁸⁷ It is certainly a relevant question for people today who have not seen Jesus while he lived on earth, whether they are from the East or the West. Is he just an ordinary man? Is he the Savior of the world? Is he the Son of God? Did he really come from the Father into this world? It is important to know who Jesus Christ really is.

In fact, it is not a new question. In the gospels we have many accounts that show us that people who met Jesus at that time were not always sure who he was. Just a few incidents shall demonstrate this. After Jesus rebuked the wind and the waves and everything was completely calm at his command, the disciples wondered, "Who is this?" (Mk. 4:41, cf. Mt. 8:27, Lk. 8:25). The disciples who had been with Jesus for some time still did not really know who Jesus was. Later, when Jesus was in his hometown, teaching at the synagogue, the people were puzzled by the words and works of Jesus. They could not understand who Jesus was. They just recognized his human origin (Mk. 6:1-6, Mt. 13:53-58, Lk. 4:16-30). In another instance it became clear that the people could not agree on who Jesus was (Jn. 7:40-52). They were divided over the person of Jesus. When Jesus met with the Samaritan woman, he confirmed to her that he was the Messiah (Jn. 4:25-26). Many of the Samaritans came to see Jesus because of the testimony of the woman and believed in him. They said, "We

⁸⁷Dietrich Bonhoeffer poses the question clearly when he says, "Christ gives an answer to the question 'Who?' The question 'Who?' is the question of transcendence. The question 'How?' is the question of immanence. The immanent question cannot grasp the significance of Jesus because he is the Son of God." In *Christology*, introduced by Edwin H. Robertson and translated by John Bowden (London: Collins, 1966), 30.

Peter Stuhlmacher comes to the same conclusion as Bonhoeffer, when he writes that biblical theology of the New Testament must begin with the question: "who is Jesus of Nazareth? The answer must run: he was the inaugurator of the Kingdom of God, sent from God," in "The Gospel of Reconciliation in Christ - Basic Features and Issues of a Biblical Theology of the New Testament," *HBT*, 1 (1979), 161-190, 165.

no longer believe just because of what you said; now we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this man really is the Savior of the world" (Jn. 4:42). These few examples show clearly that the question 'Who is Jesus?' has been in the hearts and minds of the people who saw Jesus with their own eyes. The answer to this question is the starting point for believing in him.

'Who is Jesus?' is also relevant for the situation in Asia and especially in Thailand because of the religious background of the people. They highly esteem the founder of Buddhism and recognize his importance for their belief system. When a Thai person becomes interested in Christianity, he needs to be introduced to the person of Jesus Christ, not only to the teaching about him.

Bonhoeffer continues to explain that in order to understand the work, we must know the person. The person interprets the work not vice versa.

Does the work interpret the person or the person the work? Luther often repeats that everything depends on whether the person is good; if the person is good, the work is also good, even if it does not seem to be so. On the other hand, if the work is good, it is impossible to make inferences from that about the person. The work may seem to be good, but it can still be the work of the devil. The devil appears in the form of an angel of light. The work may seem evil, but it still can be God's work. Any other view leads to justification by works. For Luther, the person interprets the work.⁸⁸

We, therefore, must know who Jesus is in order to understand what he did. Bonhoeffer shows the consequences if Jesus was just the idealistic founder of a religion. He demonstrates that in this case, we might just be stimulated to follow Jesus' example, but our sins are not forgiven. But if Jesus is the Christ, then we recognize through his work the gracious God. And when we come to Jesus, we know that our sins are forgiven and we have received life. Bonhoeffer concludes, "Whether his work perishes in the world of death or whether it abides in a new world of life depends upon the person of Christ."⁸⁹

Another aspect is important to consider. What Jesus did remains subject to misinterpretation on the part of the people: "His work allows the interpretation that he is a hero; his cross, the interpretation that it was the consummate act of a brave man remaining true to his convictions."⁹⁰ Already in the New Testament the misinterpreta-

⁸⁸Bonhoeffer, *Christology*, 38.

⁸⁹*Ibid.*, 39.

⁹⁰*Ibid.*

tion of the work of Jesus can be observed. I just want to use one example to highlight this important point. Jesus healed a demon-possessed man (Mt. 12:22). The people were amazed at the power of Jesus and wondered if Jesus was not the promised descendent of David (Mt. 12:23). In that case, it would have been possible to expect extraordinary signs from him. The religious leaders, on the other hand, came to the conclusion that Jesus was using the power of the "prince of demons" to help the demon-possessed man (Mt. 12:24). Jesus challenged the thinking of the Pharisees (Mt. 12:25-29) and told them that there is an explanation, which is beyond their understanding, "But if I drive out demons by the Spirit of God, then the kingdom of God has come upon you" (Mt. 12:28). This whole incident underscores the fact that the works of Jesus are subject to wrong interpretations. Even today we find that this happens in theological studies again and again. The person and work of Jesus Christ are subject to misinterpretation.

Bonhoeffer's proposal and observations are indeed relevant for the situation in Asia. Many religious leaders have appeared in this part of the world. They have found many followers for their teachings. There is no doubt that these leaders did good works and, humanly speaking, introduced helpful teaching. But the question remains, 'Can they be compared to Jesus?' The right interpretation of the person and work of Jesus Christ is the very foundation of faith for the people in Asia.

In the study of the life and work of Jesus, New Testament theology used to treat the synoptic gospels collectively and the theology of John's gospel separately. Nowadays, attention has been given to the theology of each individual gospel. This is in part the result of redaction criticism. This method traces the sources and selection of the author's materials and how he arranges and structures the various strands of traditions. The result is that the focus is on the theology of each individual gospel, rather than on the gospels as a whole.

In this study of Christology, however, we focus our attention on the gospel accounts as they are found in the NT canon and we will gain our insights from all four gospels. We will regard the gospel accounts as dependable sources of the life and ministry of Jesus. The method of investigation is to take into account the theological emphasis of the individual writer of the gospel and at the same time to maintain that "it is the gospel in its totality as a literary work that must be considered, if we are to

do it full justice."⁹¹ This does not only apply to the individual gospel, but to the gospels in total. It is also true that, in order to gain a comprehensive picture of Jesus Christ, all four gospels need to be studied together. To me this approach suits the Asian way of thinking.

The Western debate over the historical Jesus and the Christ of faith is not a hot issue in the study of NT theology in Asia. I agree with Peter Stuhlmacher when he writes "that historical research can never submit more than insightful possibilities for the reconstruction of the facts."⁹² He also concludes, "the collected New Testament writings, and the traditions in them, owe their existence to the appearance and historical activity of Jesus of Nazareth."⁹³

Two pitfalls must be avoided in the study of Christology: (1) To limit Jesus to a purely human figure with high moral qualities and appreciative ethical teaching. Christology cannot be studied from a purely anthropological point of view. (2) To remove Jesus far from all human experience and earthly pressures and overemphasize his divine nature. The study of Christology must hold both aspects together.

We begin with our study by looking at the broader picture of the coming of Jesus into this world.

1. The continuation of God's plan

The teaching of the Bible is very clear that there is a God and he has a plan for this world. The story of Jesus was not an isolated event in history. It must be regarded as part of God's plan with mankind and this world (Eph. 1:3-14). When John the Baptist appeared on the scene he was aware that his ministry was important. He also understood that his place in God's plan was to fulfill a certain task (Matt. 3:1-3), which was superseded by the coming of Jesus (Mt. 3:11-12, Mk. 1:7-8, Lk. 3:17-18, Jn. 1:26-27).

The continuation of God's plan throughout history is an important aspect of Christology because it shows clearly that Jesus Christ did not appear without prior indications. Jesus came into this world to be part of the fulfillment of God's redemptive plan for mankind and this world. This plan was promised right after Adam and

⁹¹H. J. B. Combrink, "The Gospel according to Matthew: Introduction & Theology," in A. B. Du Toit, ed. *Guide to the New Testament*. Vol. 4. (Pretoria, NG Kerkboekhandel, 1988): 57-101, 79.

⁹²Stuhlmacher, *Gospel of Reconciliation*, 185.

⁹³*Ibid.*, 165.

Eve failed to maintain the relationship with God (Gen. 3:15). Later, God made a covenant with Noah and promised not to destroy the world and mankind again (Gen. 9:8-17). God chose Abraham to be a blessing to all people (Gen. 12:1-3; 15:18; 17:1-2, cf. Gal. 3:8-9). Israel became the chosen people of God with whom God established a relationship through a covenant (Ex. 19:3-6; 24:1-8). Throughout the OT God kept his covenant, which he had established. In Jer. 31:31-34 God promised to establish a new covenant because the people were not able to fulfill their part of the agreement. This promise of a new covenant has been fulfilled in the coming of Jesus Christ.

God's plan has been revealed in the OT and, therefore, NT theology does not disregard the Old Testament. In fact, the teaching found in the NT is based on the OT. Stuhlmacher concludes:

Old Testament and New Testament are essentially bound to one another, because Jesus was born as an Israelite and because the New Testament revelation of Christ assumed the language form of the Old Testament traditions and made its way only in this form and structure as the gospel authoritative for the church.⁹⁴

The fact that there is a God who has a plan for this world is significant. In Buddhism there is the teaching that everything is subject to the cycle of coming and going, a never-ending circular movement. Whether this is applied to nature in general or to the life of the individual everything is cyclical orientated. In the plan of God there is movement towards a goal.

1.1 The pre-existence of Jesus

Where was Jesus before he came into this world? Did he have to go through many stages of spiritual development before he was incarnated? Did he have to go through many cycles of rebirth before he became the Messiah? These questions are relevant in the Asian context.

John's prologue to the gospel is a magnificent testimony to the pre-existence of Jesus Christ.⁹⁵ Whereas, Matthew and Mark begin the gospel with birth and infancy

⁹⁴Stuhlmacher, *Gospel of Reconciliation*, 181.

⁹⁵Joachim Jeremias comments, "The Prologue is not primarily a dogmatic passage presenting us with Christological speculations about Christ's pre-existence, his part in the creation of the world and his incarnation - to take it so would be a grave misunderstanding. Rather, is it the hymnal exaltation, by the believing community, of God's unspeakable gift through him in whom God's glory has been revealed," in Joachim Jeremias, *The Central Message of the New Testament* (London, SCM Press, 1965), 78.

narratives John starts with an exultation of the Jesus but also tells about the coming of Jesus in humanity (Jn 1:14). John presents the Logos as having its origin in eternity (Jn. 1:1-2). The Logos had a part as mediator of creation. All things were made through him. (Jn. 1:3). The Logos is also the light of men (Jn. 1:4-5). It is the true light that gives light to every man (Jn. 1:9).⁹⁶ How did John know that God was present in Christ? John testifies, "We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and only who came from the Father, full of grace and truth" (Jn. 1:14, see also 1 Jn. 1:1). The term for 'seen' (theastai) denotes (1) seeing with the physical eyes, (2) seeing, which penetrates beneath the surface. John wants to make clear that they have seen Jesus as truly human. They have also seen his disgrace on the cross. And yet, they have seen behind the human appearance of Jesus the glory of God. It depends very much on the way people see Jesus.

Jesus' own words allude to his pre-existence. In John 8:58 Jesus tells the Jews, "Before Abraham was born, I am!" This certainly is an allusion to the OT when God revealed himself to Moses and said, "I am, who I am" (Ex. 3:14, cf. Deut. 32:39). Jesus referred to his pre-existence when he prayed, "And now, Father, glorify me in your presence with the glory I had with you before the world began" (Jn. 17:5, cf. 6:62). Jesus had been with the Father before he came into this world.

The climax of the prologue is the fact that the "word became flesh and made his dwelling among us (Jn. 1:14).

1.2 The fulfillment of prophecy

The fulfillment of prophecy in the coming of Jesus is another important part of God's plan to highlight. Progressive revelation can be clearly seen in the OT. God revealed himself and his plan of salvation in various stages. Finally, Jesus came and revealed the Father (Jn. 14:5-14).

The fulfillment of prophecy is a prominent feature in the gospel according to Matthew (1:23; 2:6; 2:15; 2:18; 2:23; 4:14-17; 8:17; 12:17-21; 13:35; 21:5; 26:56; 27:9-10). Interesting is the distribution of the fulfillment citations in the gospel. In Matthew 1-2 is the emphasis on the fulfillment in connection of the events of the birth of Jesus. Matthew 4-13 shows a concentration on the citations from Isaiah. There are

⁹⁶It is important to note that it is not the inner light shared by all human beings, but it is the revealing light that shines into the darkness (Jn. 3:19-21). It does not refer to any kind of enlightenment.

no citations in the accounts of the passion of Jesus except of one statement to show that the whole event of the passion can be regarded as fulfillment of prophecy (Mt. 26:56). Other citations or allusions to the OT can be found in the gospel.

What was the purpose of including citations of the fulfillment of prophecy into his gospel? The main objective of Matthew is to show that Old Testament prophecy concerning God's plan was fulfilled in the life and work of Jesus.

Mark does not use the OT like Matthew to show the promise and fulfillment in Jesus. He emphasizes the fulfillment of the OT particularly in Jesus death on the cross. In Mk. 14:62 he quotes from Ps. 110:1 and Dn. 7:13-14: "I am," said Jesus. "And you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Mighty One and coming on the clouds of heaven." Mark uses the Psalms 22; 38; 69 and also Amos 8:9 to show that Jesus, as the Son of God, had to suffer as a righteous man (Ps. 22:2 in Mk. 15:34; 22:8b in 15:29; 22:19 in 15:24; Ps. 38:12 in 15:40; Ps. 69:22b in 15:36; Am. 8:9 in 15:33). The death of Jesus was not only in accord with scripture but with the will of God.

Luke places the account of the visit of Jesus in the synagogue of his hometown Nazareth at the beginning of his public ministry. Jesus was reading from the OT and closed with the words, "Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing" (Lk. 4:21). It has become clear that Jesus saw the purpose of his mission to demonstrate that God's promises of the OT are fulfilled.

The fulfillment of OT prophecies in the life of Jesus is a strong support for the continuity of God's plan and the fulfillment of his purposes.

1.3 Jesus fulfilled the Old Testament

Jesus understood his coming as the fulfillment of the Old Testament. "Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them" (Matt. 5:17). In his 'Sermon on the Mount' Jesus explicitly stated OT commandments. He did not replace them, but drew the attention to the real meaning, which had been obscured by the teachers of the Law. Jesus intended for the people that they should follow the commandments of the OT. He only challenged the misuse of God's commandments, e.g. the keeping of the Sabbath. This often brought him into conflict with the religious leaders.

1.4 The different starting points between Jesus Christ and Buddha

Is there a difference between Christ and Buddha as to the background and reason of their coming into this world?

There was no "sending agency" behind Buddha when he entered the world of existence. He also did not come to fulfill any prophecies.

Buddha went through a cycle of many "rebirths stretching over millions of years, experiencing previous existences as animals, men and indeed gods. It was said that 'a hundred thousand aeons ago', in a previous life, the Buddha met and was inspired by a previous Buddha called Metteya, who would in a future period of human history return to become the savior of the world."⁹⁷

There was one prediction by Brahmins on the day of Gotoma's conception that after his birth he would leave the world after seeing four signs - an old man, a sick man, a corpse, and an ascetic.⁹⁸ The father was afraid that this prophecy would become true and protected his son from all influences.

As we have seen, Jesus came into the world according to a plan and with a certain purpose. He was with the Father and, at the appointed time, appeared in this world. This aspect of Jesus that shows clearly that he was different from other founders of religions must be taught in Asia.

Examining the starting point of their life and ministry, it is obvious that Buddha and Jesus cannot be compared. The background of their lives demonstrates that they are from different worlds.

2. The humanity of Jesus

All four gospels portray Jesus as truly human. This aspect is important to consider because believers tended to view the divine nature of Jesus as more important than the human side of his existence since early Christian times.

Even though the gospels differ in many details when describing the life of Jesus, but it is evident that they are dealing with the same person. Only Mark, in the opening of his gospel, indicates that Jesus was not just an ordinary man when he wrote, "The beginning of the gospel about Jesus Christ, the Son of God" (Mark 1:1).⁹⁹

⁹⁷ John R. Davis, *The Path to Enlightenment* (London, Sydney, Auckland: Hodder & Stoughton, 1997), 4-5.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 6.

⁹⁹ Some manuscripts omit "Son of God."

John, in his gospel, provides much evidence of Jesus as a divine person. He begins his gospel with the account of Jesus' pre-existence (Jn. 1:1-18). At the same time, John brings out many features in support of Christ's humanity. John portrays Jesus as equal to God and yet he is God who came in the weakness of flesh and was fully human.¹⁰⁰ Jesus was tired and thirsty on his journey through Samaria (Jn. 4:6-7). At the grave of Lazarus Jesus showed his emotions when he was deeply moved and wept (Jn. 11:33-35). After Jesus entered Jerusalem triumphantly he talked about his death and admitted that his heart was troubled (Jn. 12:27). Jesus expressed "the full extent of his love" to the disciples when he washed their feet (Jn. 13:1-17). John tells us in one of the accounts of Jesus' appearance after the resurrection that Jesus had prepared a meal on a charcoal fire (21:9-10).

It is evident that John does not present Jesus as super-human as sometimes assumed, while the Synoptics present the human side of Jesus, the historical Jesus. All gospels present Jesus in such a way that it becomes clear that he was truly man.

After this summary some special features of Christ's humanity shall underline that Jesus was truly human and yet he was distinct from other men.

2.1 The birth of Jesus

Matthew and Luke include accounts in their gospel records about the birth of Jesus to show the human beginnings of his life. The birth narratives do not concentrate on the means because the one who is born is more important to them. Jesus, the Savior is born (Mt. 1:21). Bonhoeffer¹⁰¹ suggests that we should rather speak of the Incarnated One and not emphasize the incarnation of Jesus Christ because the doctrine of the Virgin Birth is difficult to verify. The former focuses on 'who' Jesus is and the latter on 'how' the incarnation took place. Our interest must be in the person of Jesus, rather than on the means of his conception and birth.

The birth narratives certainly want to convey that God was involved in the sending of his Son (Mt. 1:18,20, Lk. 1:35). When Joseph considered leaving Mary, an angel of the Lord appeared to confirm that God had a plan (Mt. 1:20).

¹⁰⁰George Ladd comments, "John provides some of the most important biblical materials for the later doctrine of the dual nature of Jesus, but John is not interested in such speculations. He reports sound memory of the impact Jesus made without indulging in speculative questions," in *New Testament Theology*, 289.

¹⁰¹Bonhoeffer, *Christology*, 109.

The development of Jesus is described like that of any other man. "And Jesus grew in wisdom and stature, and in favor with God and men" (Luke 2:52).

John did not include an account of the birth of Jesus but showed that the word became real flesh and lived (or dwelled) among us (John 1:14). "To dwell" is a biblical metaphor for God's presence (compare Rev. 7:15; 21:3; Mk. 9:5, Lk. 16:9).

2.2 The family of Jesus

The gospels present Jesus as part of a human family. Jesus' mother, brothers and sisters are mentioned in the NT (we do not know what happened to Josef because his name is not mentioned anymore after the incident at the temple). The names of his brothers, sisters appear several times (Mk. 6:3, Lk. 8:19-20, Mk. 3:31-32, Mt. 12:46-47).

It is significant that Jesus submitted to his parents when he was a child (Lk. 2:51-52). He lived with them like any other child. Jesus underwent normal physical, mental, and spiritual development like a normal human being.

There was a time when his family did not believe in him and could not see beyond the human appearance (Jn. 7:5). They were concerned that Jesus was a religious fanatic they needed to stop (Mk. 3:31-35).

From an early stage in his life Jesus must have realized that he, not only had human parents, but he also was conscious of his heavenly Father (Mt. 13:55-56). He tells his parents that he must be in the house of his father.

Jesus cared for his family. He showed special concern for his mother on the cross (Jn. 19:25-26) when he asked John to take care of her.

2.3 Jesus and social relationships

Jesus did things that ordinary people do. He associated himself with people of all walks of life. Jesus went to the homes of Pharisees (Lk. 7:36-50; 11:37-44; 14: 1-4). He also had close friends who received him into their home (Lk. 10:38-44).

The relationship with people also opened the door for misunderstandings. Jesus was eating with sinners and Jesus was criticized (Lk. 15:1-2). Jesus attended a wedding (Jn. 2:12).

Jesus did not withdraw from life in society. People had an opportunity to see him, talk to him, ask questions, listen to him, and have fellowship with him.

2.4 The human side of existence of Jesus Christ and Buddha

Both Jesus and Buddha are regarded as persons in history. Tradition confirms that the Buddha came from a noble family. His Father spoiled him and wanted him to enjoy life and provided for the son's pleasure. Gotama was given the best education possible at that time. In the midst of all his pleasure and material possessions Gotama obviously was seeking for meaning in life. Eventually he abandoned his family for the sake of a higher calling and never returned to take up the responsibility in his home.

Jesus was totally human and was involved in ordinary life affairs like any other peasant at that time. His family was from the poorer and lower class of society. He lived like other people and yet he was different from childhood on.

Again, we must conclude that Christ and Buddha cannot be compared with regard to their human life.

3. The self-understanding of Jesus

The gospels do not tell us when Jesus began to be aware of his special calling. It looks as if Jesus knew that he had to fulfill a certain ministry when he still was a child. Jesus was aware that the Father had sent him into this world (Jn. 20:21). He knew where he came from and where he was going to (Jn. 13:1). Jesus had a clear purpose in his life. He came to do the will of the Father (Jn. 6:38-40) and to reveal him (J. 14:8-9). He came to give his life (Jn. 10:10; Mk. 10:45). He came to seek and to save those who are lost (Lk. 19:10).

3.1 Jesus identified himself as Son of Man

Only Jesus referred to himself as Son of Man.¹⁰² Nobody else used this title to address him.¹⁰³ The OT background of this title must clearly be seen in Dan. 7:13-14. The Son of Man sayings can be classified into three major categories:

(1) Referring to the work of the Son of Man while serving on earth, e.g. Mk. 2:10, Mt. 8:20, Lk. 19:10.

¹⁰²The title 'the Son of Man' appears in the Synoptics 69 times, in John's gospel 13 times, and in the rest of the NT 1 occurrence (Acts 7:56).

¹⁰³Jn. 12:34 the people echo the words of Jesus and, therefore, must not be regarded as an exception.

- (2) Referring to the suffering and death of the Son of Man, Mt. 9:12, Mk. 9:9, Lk. 11:30.
- (3) Referring to the future glory of the Son of Man, e.g. Mt. 16:27, Mk. 13:26, Lk. 17:24.

When Jesus used the term 'Son of Man' he claimed that "both to messianic dignity and to a messianic role"¹⁰⁴ belong to him. In designating himself as the Son of Man Jesus claimed to be the Messiah. Even though Jesus did not call himself the Messiah, he made it very clear what his mission was.

3.2 Jesus regarded God as his Father

In John's gospel Jesus speaks of God as Father one hundred and six times. Throughout his life and ministry on earth Jesus used to address God as Father.

He represents the Father in such a way that it is possible to get to know him (Jn. 1:18; 5:38; 14: 6-7).

Even though Jesus did not call himself Son of God he accepted that others used this title (Mt. 16:16). In his trial before the Sanhedrin Jesus affirmed the question of the high priest that he is the Son of God (Mt. 26:63-64). This clear confirmation resulted in the decision to put him to death (Mt. 26:65-66).

3.3 The self-understanding of Jesus Christ and Buddha

Buddha became the Enlightened One after a long period of seeking. He found the light, which he consequently proclaimed.

John Davis concludes, "It is evident that Gotoma's 'enlightenment' derived from his own long struggle and inner spiritual journey."¹⁰⁵ The fundamental insight Buddha gained is encapsulated in the four noble truths: (1) Life is suffering or the fact of suffering, (2) The origin of suffering, (3) The extinction of suffering, (4) The path to the extinction of suffering.

Buddha found enlightenment or special intuitive religious knowledge through his own effort. It became the basis for the teaching that each individual must work out his own salvation. It is not necessary to depend on somebody else for help to reach the goal of Nirvana.

¹⁰⁴Ladd, *New Testament Theology*, 156.

¹⁰⁵Davis, *The Path*, 11.

Jesus was the light of the world. He was the Son of God right from birth. Jesus knew who he was and what mission he had to fulfill in this world.

4. The mission of Jesus

Jesus did not find his mission after a long search. He knew what his mission was right from the beginning of his life on earth.

"The messianic mission of Jesus had as its objective the preparation of men and women for the future kingdom of God."¹⁰⁶

4.1 Jesus came to give life

Jesus has the authority to give life to whom the Father has given him (Jn. 17:2). He is the resurrection and life (Jn. 11:25). Those who believe in him will have eternal life (Jn. 3:36; 6:40, 47; 10:10). The life Jesus gives has eschatological character and, yet, satisfies the hunger and thirst of this world (Jn. 6:33.35). Jesus promised to go before the disciples to a place he is going to prepare for them. He wants to have those who believe with him.

When Jesus talked to his disciples about the place he was preparing for them can it be compared to Nirvana in Buddhism?

Nirvana for the Buddhist is described not as a place, but as a state of being, or perhaps a state of non-being. To be in Nirvana is literally to be extinguished. There will be no birth, or re-birth, no attachment, no desire, no ignorance, no passion, or anger, nothing. Nirvana is not a place, it is a 'stateless-state', an unreal reality.¹⁰⁷

The important difference between the eternal life and being in Nirvana is that Jesus promised the believers to be with him at a place in a new state of being, whereas Nirvana is just a state of being. It is obvious that both concepts cannot be compared to each other.

¹⁰⁶Ladd, *New Testament Theology*, 181.

¹⁰⁷Davis, *The Path*, 95. Horst Pöhlmann, *Begegnungen mit dem Buddhismus* (Frankfurt am Main, 1998), 105, 155. Pöhlmann interviewed Buddhist monks in India and Sri Lanka. They told him about Nirvana that it is easier to say what it is not rather than what it is. "Nirvana ist ein anderes Wort für Freiheit, Liebe, Glück, Friede."

4.2 Jesus' death and resurrection

The accounts of the passion of Jesus form a major part of the gospels. This indicates that this must have been a major theme for the disciples of Jesus and for the early church. Jesus prepared his disciples for the last part of his earthly ministry. He was aware that the suffering was part of the plan for his life.

4.2.1 His predictions of his death

The synoptic gospels make it very clear that the confession of Peter at Caesarea Philippi that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God (Mt. 16:16), marks a turning point in the ministry of Jesus. After that important revelation, as Jesus called it, he began to show his disciples that he must suffer, be killed, and on the third day rise again (Mt. 16:21; Mk. 8:31; Lk. 9:22). For the first time Jesus tells his disciples that the passion was part of the divine plan when he used the term 'must' (dei). "The Greek dei must not be regarded in a fatalistic sense, but rather in the sense of being indispensable to the whole mission of Jesus."¹⁰⁸ In this first prediction of his suffering and death Jesus assured the disciples that the violent death was not the end but the prelude to his rising. Peter failed to understand (and the other disciples probably too!) the aspect of Jesus rising again, otherwise he would not have said to Jesus, "This shall never happen to you!" (Mt. 16:22). Jesus rebuked Peter very strongly.

Jesus repeated the prediction of his suffering after the transfiguration (Mt. 17:12,22-23; Mk. 9:30-32; Lk. 9:43-45). The synoptic gospels tell us the reaction of the disciples. Matthew reports that "the disciples were filled with grief" (17:23). Mark tells us that "they did not understand what he meant and were afraid to ask him about it" (9:32). Luke gives us three reactions of the disciples, (1) they did not understand what it meant, (2) they did not grasp it because it was hidden from them, (3) they were afraid to ask Jesus about it.

When Jesus talked to his disciples a third time about his suffering, he gave more details of the mocking and flogging (Mt. 20:17-19; Mk. 10:32-34; Lk. 18:31-34). Matthew even reports on the specific method of Christ's death namely, crucifixion. Luke has another prediction between the second and the third (Lk. 17:25).

In all the predictions Jesus has clearly presented his passion to the disciples. But they did not grasp the meaning until the event really happened.

¹⁰⁸Guthrie, *New Testament Theology*, 438.

Besides the explicit predictions of Jesus about his death there are many other indications in the gospel that Jesus was going to be killed. Mark in his gospel indicates very early that the religious leaders wanted to kill Jesus (Mk. 3:6). It looks as if the rest of Mark's gospel is a preparation for the climax of the passion of Jesus. The religious leaders felt the popularity of Jesus unbearable and decided to kill him (Jn. 11:47-48). The comparison of the bridegroom who will be taken away is another indication of an unusual fate that would bring grief to the disciples (Mk. 2:18-20, Mt. 9:14-17, Lk. 5:33-38). The sign of Jonah is also an allusion to the death of Jesus (Mt. 12:40).

The many predictions of the death of Jesus indicate that this is one of the major themes of the gospels. His death was closely linked with his mission. It is, therefore, important to know how Jesus interpreted his death. In the later development of the NT, especially in the letters of Paul, the death and resurrection are presented as the central message of the early church.

4.2.2 His interpretation of his death

What did Jesus think about his death? How did he interpret his death on the cross? In Mark 10:45 Jesus interpreted his death as giving his "life as a ransom for many." He came as a servant to serve (cf. Mt. 20:28; Luke differs and omits part of the saying 22:27).

At the Last Supper, when Jesus was together with his disciples, he referred to the blood of the covenant, which will be poured out for many (Mt. 26:28; Mk. 14:24; Lk. 22:19-20) for the forgiveness of sins.

Jesus was aware that his death on the cross was given as a ransom for the many. He brought forgiveness of sin through his death on the cross.

Guthrie summarizes the evidence of the gospels with regard to the death of Christ (1) Jesus approached death as a *voluntary* act. (2) The death of Jesus was seen to be related to the *remission* of sins. (3) Jesus recognized that his death would be *vicarious* in the sense that he was doing something for others. (4) The death was conceived as a *sacrifice* with special links to a covenant. (5) Jesus regarded himself as a *substitute* in the fulfillment of the suffering servant of Isaiah. (6) The passion has an *eschatological* aspect.¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁹Guthrie, *New Testament Theology*, 447-448.

The focus on the death of Jesus and its meaning indicates that Jesus came to deal with the most serious problem that is the sin of mankind. The root of all problems is in the heart of men (Mt. 7:1-16).

4.3 The mission of Jesus and Buddha

Buddha can be regarded as a teacher. His mission is showing the way but he is not the Savior. He is like a signpost, but he is not the way. Each person must go the way for himself.¹¹⁰

At the end of his life Buddha died a natural death. He taught that everyone must depend on himself for salvation. The emphasis on the self-effort is in contrast to Christianity.

Buddha saw the root of all problems of men in suffering. This diagnosis of the problem is different from Jesus. When the diagnosis is different, the prescribed medicine for the cure will be different as well. The fundamental difference between Christ and Buddha with regard to the problem of mankind is that Christ shows that at the root of all the problems is moral evil and how to deal with it. Central to Buddha's teaching is suffering and how to escape from it. "For the Christian, one does not have to escape from suffering; it can be transformed from something inherently destructive, into something constructive and redemptive."¹¹¹ Jesus did not overlook the fact of suffering, but he interpreted suffering differently.

Jesus is the way to the Father. He gave his life to solve the greatest and deepest problem of mankind, which is the sin. "So rather than self-effort, Christ indicated that human beings need to depend upon him for his power and strength for his forgiveness and purity."¹¹²

From this short description of the mission of Buddha it is evident that it is very different from what Jesus understood about his mission.

¹¹⁰Pöhlmann, *Begegnungen*, 119. Pöhlmann records the word of a Bikkhu saying, "Eigentlich ist Buddha ein Lehrer, kein Gott. Er weist uns hin auf den Weg der Erlösung, bringt aber nicht die Erlösung wie Jesus Christus. Ein Wegweiser geht nicht selber den Weg, den er weist. Jeder muss ihn selber gehen."

¹¹¹Davis, *The Path*, 70.

¹¹²*Ibid.*, 17.

From the person and mission of Jesus Christ we want to turn to his ministry. Again, only a few aspects haven been selected to demonstrate the relevance in the Asian context.

Chapter 7

The Ministry of Jesus Christ

Jesus constantly was teaching, preaching, or healing people. Numerous people came to him for help. It is amazing that Jesus never turned away people.

It is generally agreed that Jesus began his ministry after his baptism (Mt. 3:13-17, Mk. 1:9-11, Lk. 3:21-22, Jn. 1:32-34). A voice from heaven confirmed, "This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased" (all gospels accounts confirm this voice from heaven). It cannot be implied that this was the adoption of Jesus as the Son of God. It rather is a confirmation of Jesus being the Son of God already.

We will look at the ministry of Jesus from two sides, his teaching and his works. In fact, both belong together and should not be separated. What Jesus taught others he practices himself. In his works he demonstrated his authority.

1. The teaching of Jesus

Jesus had an extended teaching ministry. He taught in public at many occasions. When people came to him, he was prepared to teach them about their relationship to God, challenged them to change their way of life and thinking, and he invited them to believe in him as the one who was sent by the Father.

Jesus taught, in particular, his disciples. He wanted them to understand all aspects of his teaching in order to be able to carry on with the same ministry. The disciples also came and asked Jesus to teach them (Lk. 11:1-2). Jesus taught verbally many lessons but also through his example of a dedicated life.

The method Jesus used in his teaching is remarkable. He used language, which the people understood. His examples were taken from ordinary life situations, which everybody knew and could identify with. It is not surprising that the people wanted to listen to him and were amazed about what he had to say. "When Jesus had finished saying these things, the crowds were amazed at his teaching, because he taught as one who had authority, and not as their teachers of the law" (Mt. 7:28-29).

Jesus had a rich variety of topics he was speaking about. His aim was to invite the people to come into a meaningful fellowship with God and to lead a life that is worthy of him. He wanted the people to understand that God loves them and cares about their future destiny. One of the prominent subjects was about the kingdom of God.

1.1 Jesus' teaching about the kingdom of God

The Kingdom of God is the central message in the teaching of Jesus. Mark introduces the ministry of Jesus after John was imprisoned. Jesus went to Galilee to proclaim the good news of God. "The time has come," he said, "The kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the good news" (Mk. 1:15). And Matthew summarizes the beginning of Jesus' ministry with the words, "Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, preaching the good news of the kingdom, and healing every disease and sickness among the people" (Mt. 4:23).

The meaning of the term kingdom of God (*basilaei tou theou*) is based on the OT understanding that God must reign as king. "It is now generally agreed that it means not so much a domain, as a reign; not so much an area over which a king reigns, as the activity of reigning."¹¹³ A clear evidence of the concept is found in the Lord's prayer, where the coming of the kingdom and the doing of God's will are linked together (Mt. 6:10).

There are two aspects of the teaching of the kingdom of God, which must be seen together: (1) the present aspect of the kingdom of God, and (2) the future or eschatological aspect.

The Pharisees asked Jesus when the kingdom would come. Jesus replied that the "kingdom of God is within you" (Lk. 17:20-21) or "among you." People can come under the reign of God, not in future but now. And Jesus announced that in his person the kingdom of God is near. The people needed to respond with repentance.

Jesus also taught about the future or eschatological aspect of the kingdom of God. Its coming will mean the final destruction of Satan (Mt. 25:41). Those who have believed in Christ will be gathered together (Mt. 13:36-43). There will be perfect fellowship with God (Lk. 13:28-29). The glorious focal point will be the coming of the Son of Man (Mt. 16:27-28, Mk. 13:24-27). It will be a time of the perfect rule of God.

¹¹³Guthrie, *New Testament Theology*, 409.

The kingdom of God is a new concept for Christians in Thailand. They certainly understand the meaning of kingdom as territory, but the spiritual aspect of the kingdom that the life must be under the rule and direction of God, is more difficult to be accepted.

From Jesus' teaching of the kingdom of God we want to turn our attention to the teaching about the Holy Spirit. The ministry of the Holy Spirit is of special interest to the Thai believers. The reason behind this can be seen in (1) the openness to the supernatural because of their religious background, (2) the longing to experience the power of God in their lives, and (3) to be equipped with strength to meet the challenges of life.

1.2 Jesus' teaching about the Holy Spirit

In the Synoptics the birth of Jesus is attributed to the creative power of the Holy Spirit (Mt. 1:18, Lk. 1:35). John the Baptist points to the Coming one who will baptize with the Holy Spirit (Mt. 3:11, Mk. 1:8, Lk. 3:16, Jn. 1:33). At the baptism, the Holy Spirit descended on Jesus (Mt. 3:16, Mk. 1:10, Lk. 3:21-22, Jn. 1:32). The Spirit also led Jesus into the wilderness to be tempted by Satan (Mt. 4:1, Mk. 1:12). Jesus was endowed with the Holy Spirit to fulfill his messianic mission.

The promise of the Holy Spirit is most prominent in the gospel of John. Jesus told his disciples that they would receive the Holy Spirit who will be with them and in them (Jn. 14: 16-17). The Spirit will teach them and lead them deeper into the truth (Jn. 14:25-26).

The coming of the Holy Spirit makes it clear that the ministry of Jesus will continue. Jesus promised them "another paraclete," somebody who will replace him after his ascension.

Jesus told the disciples that the Holy Spirit will enable them to encounter difficult circumstances (Mt. 10:20, Lk. 12:12). He will be like a fountain in the lives of the disciples (Jn. 7:37-39).

The disciples needed to know that, through the Holy Spirit, Christ's presence was realized. They do not have to depend on their own ability. The Holy Spirit will enable them and make Jesus real to them.

2. The works of Jesus

If the work interprets the person, then it is important to study the works of Jesus in order to know who he really is.

Jesus performed many miracles. John points to the purpose of the miracles recorded in his gospel. "Jesus did many other miraculous signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not recorded in this book. But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name" (Jn. 20:30-31). John tells us (1) that Jesus did more miracles than recorded in his gospel (this can also be applied for the synoptics). (2) The miracles were performed before people. (3) The purpose of the miracles is that 'you' (the readers of the gospel!) may believe that Jesus is the Christ. (4) The ultimate goal of believing will be achieved, namely having life in the name of Jesus.

Another involvement in his ministry was engaging in combat with Satan and the demons. Jesus recognized the existence of Satan and demons. At the beginning of his ministry Jesus was tempted by Satan (Mt. 4:1). This was the first encounter with the forces of evil and was aimed at neutralizing the plan of redemption. Jesus did not give in to the temptation and his victory was the beginning of the defeat of Satan.

Satan's main objective is to oppose the redemptive work of God. He claims to have power over the world (Lk. 4:6).

The most obvious activity of the demons is to take possession at the center of a person. Jesus demonstrated his authority and drove out demons from many people (e.g. Mk. 1:21-28; 3:20-30).

Thai Christians do not need any proofs of the existence of the supernatural. Their world-view includes the realm of the spirit-world. Important to them is that Jesus has the authority over Satan and the demons.

3. The teaching and ministry of Jesus and Buddha

Buddha was showing the way. He never claimed to be the way to Nirvana. In his teaching Buddha made it very clear that each follower of his teaching must work out his own salvation. There is no help from a Savior. In fact, depending on help from any source shows weakness and not strength.

Buddha avoided answering the question of the origin of mankind. He contended that someone who was hit by a poisoned arrow would not ask where the arrow

came from, but would want to get rid of both the arrow and the poison in his body as quickly as possible.

Teaching about an ultimate goal or a hope that goes beyond the present life is only possible when we know where we come from. Jesus' ultimate goal in his teaching was people believing in him and to be with him in all eternity.

4. Conclusion

The focus in chapter six and seven has been on the person, mission, and ministry of Jesus Christ. It is important to know who Jesus Christ is in order to understand what he did. The works cannot be separated from the person and must be interpreted from the understanding of the person.

It has become clear that in all aspects of Jesus' being and doing, he was different from Buddha. They cannot be compared because they differ in their sending into this world, the understanding of their mission, and the performing of their works.

Asian Christians must understand the difference between Jesus Christ and other founders of religions. Jesus is not only pointing to the way to go, but he is the way (John 14:6).

Forming a Christian community is the natural result when people understand who Jesus Christ is and believe in him. It also was the intention of Jesus to bring his followers together in a community that demonstrates the new life that they have found in him. Those who believe in Christ do not just enjoy their own salvation, but they are called to fulfill a mission in this world.

Therefore, we will conclude our study with a brief introduction to the community of Jesus Christ. In fact, the Christian community is an important instrument in bringing the love of Christ to those who do not have much hope in this world. It also provides a supportive fellowship for those who believe for mutual encouragement and help in their daily walk with Christ.

Christian communities are vital in the Asian context because many Christians have to face a lot of pressure and need the support of fellow believers.

Chapter 8

The Community of Jesus Christ

Jesus gathered around him a group of people who followed him, learned from him, and was sent out by him. This was the beginning of the Christian community, which has been in existence through the ages till today.

1. The call into the community

Jesus called people to follow him (Mk. 3:12). The call was basically extended to all people, not just to a selected group in society. And Jesus expected a response to his call. Out of those who responded to his call Jesus selected his closest followers, whom he had chosen after much prayer (Lk. 6:12-15). Jesus wanted them to be with him and prepare them for their ministry (Mk. 3:13-14).

Many responded to the call and shared their entire life with Jesus. They were the ones to carry on the ministry of Jesus. They were expected to be light and salt (Mt. 5:13-16). Jesus wanted his followers to stay in the world and not withdraw from the ordinary affairs of life (Jn. 17:15-19). The disciples must be ready to face opposition, but Jesus never asked them to withdraw from the world (Jn. 17: 14).

The gospels not only tell us about the positive response to Jesus' call to follow him. There was much opposition and rejection for various reasons. This even contributed to the final rejection, when Jesus was crucified.

The call to follow Jesus is the same today. In the preaching, teaching, and proclamation of the gospel the call reaches those who do not believe in Jesus.

2. The life as the community

The term 'community' has been chosen deliberately over against the term 'church' because in the gospels *ekklesia* (ἐκκλησία) occurs only twice in Mt. 16:18-20 and 18:17-18. This leads to the question "whether the idea of the Christian church originated with Jesus, or whether it was a later development."¹¹⁴ There are certainly many problem areas related to the present appearance and structure of the church.

¹¹⁴Guthrie, *New Testament Theology*, 701.

What did Jesus expect of his followers? Jesus certainly confirmed that the 'Golden Rule' of the OT did apply to the life of his followers (Mt. 22: 34-40). Those who believe express their love to God and to their neighbor.

Jesus expected a change from the inside out, a renewal of the heart that was reflected in the character and behavior of the disciples. In his Sermon on the Mount (Mt. 5-7) Jesus laid out the program for those who have joined the community of the believers. Their personal lifestyle must reflect their faith in Jesus. They also care for one another and serve each other (Jn. 13).

3. The mission of the community

Jesus sent the disciples to minister in the same way as he did (Mt. 10:1-5). They also had the power to perform miracles and drive out demons. They also were expected to bring blessing to the homes they entered. Those who follow Jesus do not withdraw from the world.

The scope of the ministry was extended after Jesus' resurrection (Mt. 28:16-20). They were expected to go into the entire world and teach all peoples. It is obvious that the task of bringing the good news about Jesus just started with the disciples and continues with all those who believe.

Being integrated into the community of believers is an essential aspect of the call of Jesus. In a situation where people come from a non-Christian background it is even more important that they find love and understanding among those who follow Jesus.

Conclusion and Suggestions

Developing theology that meets the needs of people in the Asian context is an urgent need. In our study we have looked at some of the features that need to be considered when writing theology that takes into account the cultural, religious, and social context of the people.

NT theology must focus on the person and ministry of Jesus Christ because of the multi-religious setting in Asia. Theological students and Christians must develop a trusting relationship with Jesus Christ and not just study the teaching of him. Jesus Christ is unique in what he taught and what he did. The person of Jesus Christ must be

made known among the people in Asia so that they believe in him and experience the transformation of their lives and society.

I want to conclude my study with some suggestions for the development of theology and especially NT theology in Asia:

1. Theological institutions must encourage capable students to develop their skills in the area of academic study and writing. This would lay the foundation for Asian scholars to write comprehensive theologies for their own context. If possible, those students should pursue their theological training in Asia with some experience in a Western culture.
2. Asian and Western theologians must work together in the development of biblical theology that is suitable for the people in Asia with a diverse religious and cultural background.
3. It is necessary to identify the universal aspects of theology that transcends all contexts and cultures as well as to clarify the problems and issues that need an answer from the Word of God and Christian perspective.
4. In developing biblical theology, we must constantly be aware that theology must lead to the glory of God.
5. The scholar who wants to develop biblical theology should have the same attitude as Ezra:

" For Ezra had set his heart to study the law of the LORD, and to do it, and to teach his statutes and ordinances in Israel" (Ezra 7:10 NIV).

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