

*Saving God's Face: A Chinese Contextualization of Salvation through Honor and Shame.* By Jackson Wu. Pasadena, CA: William Carey International University Press, 2013, xii + 356 pp. \$25.00 paper, \$11.99 Kindle.

Missiology is a derivative discipline; it derives from God's missional calling upon his people and theological reflection upon the Christian Bible. In addition, missiology integrates insights from the social sciences that facilitate cross-cultural communication. While missiological research closely engages fields such as anthropology and sociology, theory and practice must always stand upon sound theology. Jackson Wu's study reflects this theologically-centered conception of missiology; thus, it is a serious work of applied theology.

Wu's provocative central idea is that existing methods of theological contextualization truncate the gospel under the influence of Western cultural themes, presenting a message at variance with the full witness of Scripture. In response, Wu advocates a more deliberately cross-cultural interpretive framework in order to counter culture-bound tendencies that impede the development, proclamation, and reception of biblically faithful theology.

Wu's argument unfolds in six chapters. An introductory chapter previews following material and intimates that following Wu's ensuing discussion will require thinking in exegetical, theological, and sociological categories. Framing his interdisciplinary approach is an assertion that first appears here and echoes throughout the book: the Bible is "ultimately authoritative in theological and missiological questions. Truth exists apart from any particular culture" (pp. 2–3).

The second chapter evaluates "Theological Contextualization in Practice." Wu examines the uncritical assumption of a particular understanding of the gospel message that has matured through the centuries in the West and permeates its cultural meta-narratives: a view that predominantly employs legal metaphors and centers upon an atomistic view of humanity as individuals. Wu notes that, on occasion, the Bible indeed explains the responsibility of individuals to a holy God with legal terminology, and that Western Christianity is not mistaken in articulating this concept in its theology. However, he also asserts that legal metaphors are but one thematic strand intertwined with others in the grand narrative of Scripture. Gospel proclamation that solely employs individual-focused, legal language is theologically reductionistic. Screened and adapted for a Western cultural mindset, this abridged gospel at times faces difficulty communicating to non-Western cultures. In order to counter reductionism in theological contextualization, Wu advocates that acts of interpretation precede communication and application. Specifically, the interpretive grid of a given non-Western culture's worldview (rather than that of Western culture) provides the proper starting point for contextualization within that cultural context. Then the articulation of biblical theology, grounded in grammatical-historical exegesis, initiates a process of questioning and replacing elements of the prevailing worldview according to scriptural norms.

Wu's own work in China leads him to critique past and present methods of "Theologizing for a Chinese Culture" in the third chapter. Confucian values such as considerations of "face" in all social interactions, ancestor veneration, and group

identity permeate Chinese society. Important theological concepts such as sin, righteousness, and law carry meanings that vary significantly from Western Christian expectations. Foundational differences such as these can seriously undercut theological contextualization that remains insensitive to the Chinese context. Thus, on one hand, Wu critiques familiar strategies bound closely to the West. On the other hand, he faults “Sino-theology” for its ethnocentrism and overt employment of Chinese cultural mores as norms for Scripture interpretation. While respecting helpful insights that issue from practitioners of several reviewed contextualization strategies, the third chapter delineates what Wu’s proposals in the following chapters do *not* entail.

Wu’s fourth chapter orients the reader to “Honor and Shame in Context,” for which the twin contexts of concern are contemporary cultures and Scripture. “Face” is social capital, a measure of one’s honor. Generally speaking, “face” manifests itself in the West in the prestige one accrues individually through achievements; therefore, the thought process of most Western evangelism consists in countering works-based righteousness. In contrast, in day-to-day life Chinese ascribe “face” in the context of maintaining social standing instead of amassing personal accomplishments, so the notion of striving to do good works in order to merit approval from God is essentially alien to Chinese cultural thinking. Wu then surveys honor and shame concepts in Scripture in order to suggest that honor and shame are much more prominent categories of biblical theology than most presentations grounded in Western cultures would suggest.

The fifth chapter, “A Soteriology of Honor and Shame,” treats these two concepts as integral components of a biblical theology of salvation. First, Wu addresses two preliminary and related questions: “What does the atonement do for God?” and “What does Jesus accomplish for people?” Next, he draws upon both the traditional understanding and “New Perspective” on Paul to flesh out an honor-shame view of justification. He notes that the traditional interpretation stresses justification as a matter of “achieved” righteousness (brought about through Christ’s sinless sacrifice, accomplishing what sinful humans cannot do—an *ethical* concern), and the New Perspective predominantly views justification as “ascribed” righteousness (membership within God’s covenant people—an *ethnic* concern). Wu asserts that thinking in terms of honor and shame correlates ethically and ethnically related teaching in Paul’s letters, and he demonstrates this assertion through a survey of Romans. Lastly, Wu presents a synthesized honor and shame-focused soteriology, showing that God vindicates his own honor and glory through justification. A sixth chapter recapitulates Wu’s arguments and advances his conclusions.

By any measure, *Saving God’s Face* is a challenging read. Unfortunately, the publisher has altered the book very little from its dissertation format, printing it on 8½ x 11 paper with left justification and occasionally allowing minor word processing issues to detract from the reading experience. Issues likely familiar only to missions specialists at times appear in the text without explanations that a broader audience requires. Even so, Wu has added a Scripture index not present in his original dissertation, facilitating use of the book as a reference work. Availability in

Kindle format increases the book's accessibility, particularly for Wu's fellow field theologians who value portability and security.

Other challenges facing the reader are much more significant, including identifying the relationship between Wu's book and the existing body of works on theological contextualization. For example, this is not another "what the Bible really says" book that advances sensationalist claims of novel insights on Scripture, refuting traditional understandings. Further, despite Wu's assertion that viewing the Bible through the lens of a Chinese cultural worldview can lead to helpful interpretive insights, he has expressly not written in advocacy of ethnocentric, reader-response *eisegesis*. Perhaps most importantly, Wu has refrained from a tendency familiar to readers and writers of dissertations: promotion of a sweeping "theory of everything" that discounts contrary data and is uncharitable to scholarly positions against which it offers an alternative. In contrast, Wu actually critiques the hegemony of a reigning viewpoint in theology: the Western individual-focused, legal metaphor-dominated worldview. Indeed, the social location of much of Wu's readership within Western culture calls for openness to self-critique, which presents yet another challenge for readers.

Wu's opposition to "either-or" thinking—that is, the classical Western perspective is right, and differing viewpoints from other cultures are wrong—does not employ the flawed kinds of "both-and" thinking that eschew the critical sifting of ideas. Instead, noting that no theology is free of cultural "baggage," he advocates Scripture-driven, critical rethinking of theological contextualization that values complementary insights derived from communication across cultures. Developing sufficient cultural awareness to communicate within and to a host culture's vantage point requires significant investment of effort and time. Furthermore, conducting grammatical-historical exegesis in order to form theology for cross-cultural contextualization is also an energy- and time-intensive task. Thus the fruits of Wu's work call into question mission strategies that primarily emphasize rapid advance, discourage long-term personal investment, and shun in-depth interaction with the whole canon of Scripture.

Wu's work is weighty. Upon turning the final page, the reader may sense the need to review antecedent arguments or even read the book a second time. Those with vested interests in specialized fields will undoubtedly register points of dissent with Wu or raise questions of method; such is the nature of reception of cross-disciplinary studies. Yet what if Wu is essentially right? What if a fundamental way of conceptualizing life that is native to billions of people has lain underappreciated in the text of the Bible itself, in the formation of theology, and in the communication of the message of Scripture through contextualization? Implications for the practice of missions and biblical theology are fraught with consequence; thus, Wu's work merits careful consideration of a broad readership.

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