CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

This book argues that a dialogically contextualized Chinese soteriology, which draws heavily upon honor-shame concepts prevalent in Chinese culture, issues forth in a biblical understanding of atonement and justification. It proposes an interdisciplinary method of theological contextualization that intentionally utilizes a cultural worldview for the sake of exegesis. This approach demonstrates how the integration of cultural, historical, and biblical contexts is critical for developing a theology that both draws from Chinese culture and builds upon traditional theological debates. As a result, this study illustrates the point that “[t]here is no such thing as ‘theology’; there is only contextualized theology.”

“Dialogical contextualization” tempers some of the bias and limitation inherent in any culture, paradigm, or scholarly research. After all, theological contextualization involves a number of contexts, including those of Scripture, the interpreter, the missionary/messenger, and the recipient of the message. Those who contextualize theology can bring these contexts into dialogue. Biblical truth transcends any single context. Unfortunately, efforts to produce contextualized theology tend either to minimize the original meaning of the text or else import theological categories foreign to

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a given culture. These problems are evident in past attempts to contextualize the Christian message in Chinese culture in particular and in honor-shame (HS) cultures in general. Rather than first interpreting the Bible and then applying the findings to a cultural context, this book shows that by taking a Chinese HS lens, there emerge a number of critical theological issues that have otherwise been overshadowed by other motifs, such as law. If one takes seriously a Chinese collectivist orientation, what happens when that perspective is applied to biblical interpretation? To be clear, this book prioritizes exegesis, not eisegesis, so that the interpretations reflect the original meaning of the biblical text itself. Without forging false dichotomies, one finds that HS comprehensively accounts for the diversity of biblical texts related to soteriology, all the while challenging the primacy of traditional Western theological categories. As a result, one gains helpful insight into how to share the gospel of salvation in a Chinese context. The proposed soteriology, contextualized in Chinese culture, can contribute to common views of theology and missiological method—and correct misleading ones.

This book assumes a conservative, evangelical perspective. Therefore, the Bible is regarded as ultimately authoritative in theological and missiological questions. Truth

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exists apart from any particular culture. In that sense, it is “supracultural.” However, biblical theology must never be reduced to an abstraction. The human act of theologizing is always expressed within a cultural context. In that respect, theological formulations may be incomplete or flawed. Given human limitations, theologies can improve as they become more intercultural. The ensuing chapters interact with scholars of various theological persuasions across academic disciplines. However, at critical points, concentrated attention is generally given to evangelical thinkers.

Chapter 2 (“Theological Contextualization in Practice”) argues that a practical model for theological contextualization is most basically a work of biblical interpretation. In short, contextualizers read Scripture through the lens of those in a local culture. Missionaries stunt this process when they prioritize a particular formulation of the gospel before having answered the question, “What is contextualization?” In so doing, they effectively “beg the question” since their assumptions predetermine the framework, emphases, and motifs that must be used to contextualize theology in a given culture. As a result, Western missiological thinking has largely reduced contextualization merely to application and communication.

All human cultures express limited points of view, including Western cultures that have produced the preponderance of traditional Christian theology. Because Western theologies overwhelmingly emphasize the legal motif and the individual, other themes, like HS and collectivism, can be muted. This is despite the fact that one finds these latter ideas in Scripture and the ancient biblical world. Although biblical truth transcends any one culture, it is always contextualized in some cultural form. All people bring to Scripture a worldview, which at points intersects with and diverges from the perspective
of a biblical author. Missionaries and theologians compensate for their subjective limitations by using an interdisciplinary approach to contextualization. The chapter proposes a method to help people intentionally broaden their own worldview lens.

Chapter 3 (“Theologizing for a Chinese Culture”) identifies a number of prominent themes and concerns within Chinese culture that will shape a contextualized theology in China. Scholars from various fields agree that Chinese people have consistently valued honor (i.e. “face”), harmony, and hierarchy. They are more group-oriented (versus individualistic) and focus on the practical aspects of life and religion. People think most basically in terms of relationships (or guanxi) not law. In history, the Chinese worldview divides the world into those who are insiders and those who are outside the “Middle Kingdom.” The increased presence and power of foreigners has fostered differing degrees of ethnocentrism and nationalism.

Many people have addressed the question of Chinese theology, largely agreeing on what constitutes a Chinese worldview. Nevertheless, they sometimes differ with

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respect to how this applies to contextualization. The chapter identifies six general approaches, each with its own distinctive emphasis. A “situational” methodology accentuates the Chinese context, even sounding hostile to the West. “Sino” theologians give greatest weight to ethnic identity. A “synchronistic” approach uses cultural concepts to convey theological meaning. Others more heavily interact with “scriptural” questions and categories. A number of “systematic” writers focus on the theoretical concerns of Chinese contextualization. Finally, missionary practitioners are “soterian” in that they typically stress soteriology and evangelism. Although the chapter offers a number of insights about Chinese culture, these issues seem to have little or no effect on the tools used by this group. This chasm between missionary practice and scholarly consensus is noteworthy.

Chapter 4 (“Honor and Shame in Context”) compares HS in Chinese culture, the Ancient Near East (ANE), and Scripture in order to understand its relevance for Chinese theology. Humans universally have a concern for HS. Although the desire for “face” expresses itself in variegated ways, a few principles are evident.7 “Honor” refers to the value placed upon people within their social context. It may either be ascribed or

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achieved. A person’s public identity consists in his or her relationships. Thus, those who live in cultures that emphasize HS are especially sensitive to the importance of gaining, losing, or lacking honor. “Shame” is the ill repute brought upon a person for some perceived deficiency or failure to meet the standards issued by his or her community. Every culture has manifold ways of conveying, assessing, and regulating HS. Laws are simply one way society expresses its HS standards.  

Not only does HS encompass the whole of human life, it is especially pervasive in Chinese culture. The Chinese language is rich with idioms and terms related to HS. “Face,” typically translated mianzi or lian, is a kind of “currency” with which social transactions take place. “Face” is a practical and daily consideration in China. When it comes to moral issues, Chinese people tend to speak in terms of what is honorable and shameful. They are cognizant of the fact that different standards of right and wrong are used in different relationships and situations. HS can be shared collectively, reinforcing a divide between insiders and outsiders (e.g., “Chinese” versus “foreigners”).

Not surprisingly, the Bible consistently demonstrates an HS perspective. Anthropologists have written extensively to show how HS-related issues influenced ancient biblical cultures and thus Scripture. Theologians have long recognized the importance of God’s glory through the Bible. Yet, on the whole, people have given little

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notice to how this theme is but the tip of the iceberg when it comes to HS’s influence on Scripture. HS is foundational to the entire biblical narrative. A number of writers have formulated theologies of HS. Jonathan Edwards famously argues that God does all things for the sake of his glory/honor. Humans are made in God’s image and so should publically reflect his worth. All people “have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Rom 3:23). As will be seen, writers are frequently concerned about how to use HS to explain “sin” and thus what Jesus accomplished. However, their attempts are introductory and not comprehensive. At times, they treat HS primarily as a social-science issue, not as a “theological” problem on the same level of law.

Using the mosaic of insights gained thus far, Chapter 5 (“A Soteriology of Honor and Shame”) demonstrates how HS frames and gives color to the biblical doctrine of salvation. Texts related to soteriology are diffused throughout the Bible. The gospel of salvation is more comprehensive and complex than some might suggest. Rather than restricting one’s interpretive lens to a few select texts that highlight the legal-motif, this chapter notes the diversity of ways that Scripture applies HS language to salvation. In

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the atonement, Christ “saves God’s face” and objectively pays the honor-debt all humans owe to God. Subjectively, Christ’s death inaugurated the new covenant. God gives his people new hearts and the Holy Spirit, thus enabling them to obediently honor God in community. Naturally, one sees in Scripture a constant theme—group identity. On the one hand, sinful people prefer the approval of others to the praise that comes from God. On the other hand, Jesus and Paul challenge the boasting of the Jews who honored themselves as Abraham’s offspring. In Romans, Paul expounds upon the doctrine of justification in part to undermine the notion that salvation is tied to ethnic identity. The gospel challenges every sense of cultural superiority. Those who boast in Christ are ascribed as righteous. Because God upholds his own honor, all who trust in Christ are reckoned as Abraham’s offspring and will not be put to shame.

Finally, Chapter 6 concludes the study by posing a series of questions and possible applications. This book seeks to lay a foundation for theological


A spectrum of views can be found in Mark D. Baker and Joel B. Green, Recovering the Scandal of the Cross: Atonement in New Testament and Contemporary Contexts (Downers Grove, Ill.: IVP Academic, 2000); C. Norman Kraus, “The Cross of Christ: Dealing with Shame and Guilt,” JapChrQ 53, no. 4 (Fall 1987): 221–27; Scot McKnight, A Community Called Atonement: Living Theology (Nashville, Tenn.: Abingdon, 2007); Robert Jewett, “Shame and Atonement in Romans: A Potential Resource for Theology in Korea” (Yonsei University, Seoul, Korea, 1 Nov 2007), Online: http://cafe321.daum.net/_c21_/bbs_search_read?grpid=DzmC&fldid=TMZ2&contentval=00001zzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzz&nenc=&fen=1&from=&q=%B0%A5%B6%F3%B5%F0%BE%C6%BC%AD%BF%E4%BE%E0&nil_profile=cafetop&nil_menu=sch_updw&listnum=; Thomas Schreiner et al., The Nature of the Atonement: Four Views (ed. James Beilby and Paul R. Eddy; Downers Grove, Ill.: IVP Academic, 2006); Charles E. Hill and Frank A. James III, eds., The Glory of the Atonement: Biblical, Theological & Practical Perspectives (Downers Grove, Ill.: IVP Academic, 2004).

contextualization in China. It is impossible to address the variety of implications for missiological theory and practice as well as biblical and theological studies. Methodologically, the book may open doors for more fruitful dialogue and integration between missiology and theology. For instance, this study shows what dialogical contextualization looks like when applied to a specific cultural context, namely, a Chinese context. It demonstrates that contextualization and theology cannot be so neatly separated; in fact, they essentially refer to the same process as described from different perspectives. Examining how others have utilized the HS motif can assist prospective attempts to theologize in HS cultures, train church leaders and missionaries, and more broadly foster unity within the global church. One benefit gained in the process is that Christians from both East and West alike can become increasingly cognizant of all the Bible teaches so as not to fall prey to theological or cultural provincialism. Naturally, since the Bible conveys a message for the world, it is hoped that people in the West would likewise benefit from these insights from Asian culture. Many who are more accustomed to a law-based presentation of salvation could benefit from hearing a message about the restoration of God’s glory and the removal of human shame.