



Asian Pacific American Christianity in a Post-Ethnic Future¹

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Once upon a time, it was obvious why Asian Pacific American congregations existed. Immigrants who could not speak English needed places where they could hear the gospel in their own languages. They needed places where they could hold on to their culture in a strange new world. They needed places of refuge from a society that clearly discriminated against foreigners and Asians. In a country that prided itself as Christian, Asian Pacific American churches before World War II were among the very few places where immigrants from Asia could find the practice of authentic Christianity. Thus, the celebration of Japanese Baptist Church's one hundred years of ministry is an affirmation that Christ's Gospel still has the power to stand against the corrosive forces that "water down" an American Christianity that is supposed to be both evangelistic and prophetic.

But today, it is not so easy to answer the question of whether Asian American congregations should continue to exist. Today, Asian Pacific Americans are changing so unpredictably that one commentator quipped that "the Asian American identity as we now know it may not last another generation."² Nearly fifty percent of Asian Pacific Americans under age 35 are marrying non-Asians. How will the increasing numbers of interracial marriages impact Asian Pacific American congregations of the future? Will the next generation of bi-racial children identify themselves as Asian Pacific Americans or as something

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"Asian Pacific American Christianity is a prophetic community of faith that will help guide American Christianity towards the global, multi-racial, multi-lingual, and yet-to-be-realized Reign of God in Christ."

different? Where will they want to worship? Also, most Asian Pacific Americans are now being raised in the suburbs among Caucasians. While many may experience an awakening of Asian Pacific American consciousness in college where they encounter the Asian Pacific American label, most will probably remain ambivalent about their Asian Pacific American identities. Indeed, this may be one of the reasons why Asian Pacific American Christians are becoming the largest minority groups in evangelical campus ministries such as InterVarsity Christian Fellowship and Campus Crusade. In most of these Christian fellowships, questions of racial identity are subordinated to religious identity (though InterVarsity Christian Fellowship and Asian American Christian Fellowship have become more explicit about doing ministry with the Asian Pacific American context in mind). In these campus fellowships, an Asian Pacific American Christian can be surrounded by many other Asians without feeling compelled to engage the issue of their racial identity or participate in the Asian Pacific American consciousness movements on campus!³ Furthermore, with fewer American-born Asians entering and staying in the ministry, more and more Asian Pacific American congregations are calling Caucasian pastors to shepherd their English speaking youth ministries (n.b. it is possible that there are more Caucasian pastors of Asian Pacific American congregations than Asian Pacific American pastors of predominantly Caucasian congregations). What impact will this trend have on the next generation of Asian Pacific American Christians, especially if Caucasian pastors are insensitive to the cultural and social contexts which the young people in their congregation face daily? Asian Pacific American demographics today is becoming so diverse that one wonders whether it will be possible to unite every group under the umbrella Asian Pacific American.⁴

Another reason why the future of Asian Pacific American congregations is now open to question is related to the current political climate. The current neo-conservative ideological practice of bashing affirmative action policies in favor of so-called "color-blind" policies is slowly seeping into our Asian Pacific American congregations. There is now a political climate hostile to open conversations about racial differences. At first glance, this may seem strange because there is also so much conversation about multiculturalism and respecting diversity. But what has happened with much of the conversation about

multiculturalism is the impression that diversity is respected so long as no one organizes politically along ethnic or racial lines. Solutions to racial discrimination have now shifted away from the political process towards individualistic racial reconciliation projects. Racism is now no longer viewed as structural and institutional, but personal and attitudinal. In any case, because Asian Pacific Americans do not appear to "fit" into the current Black/White conversation about race, we are tempted to think that racism (institutional or otherwise) does not affect us as much. Consequently, there is little motivation to organize ourselves along racial lines. This sensibility has influenced the way Asian Pacific Americans are choosing to engage politics. Jere Takahashi notes that the Japanese American community is in a period of transition "and no longer possess the same cultural affinities and economic interests, among others, that had previously helped sustain ethnic community ties."⁵ Eric Liu confirms this when he says "more than ever before, Asian Americans are only as isolated as they want to be. They – we – do not face the levels of discrimination and hatred that *demand* an enclave mentality, particularly among the second generation, which, after all, provides most of the leadership for the nation-race. The choice to invent and sustain a pan-Asian identity is just that: a choice, not an imperative."⁶ Ironically, when Asian Pacific American Christians begin to see their ethnicity as merely a personal preference (symbolic ethnicity), they will less likely join ethnic churches. And many second to fifth generation Asian Pacific American Christians—who associate Asian immigrant and pan-Asian congregations with clannish outlooks—are choosing to leave the Asian Pacific American church, though it doesn't look like they are joining predominantly Caucasian or multi-racial congregations en masse either. (One exception may be Redeemer Presbyterian Church in New York City, which is drawing many second generation Chinese Americans. Though lauded by many Christians as a model of multi-cultural ministry, this phenomenon may reveal more about the perceptions of the younger Chinese Americans than about Redeemer Presbyterian. Perhaps these younger, upwardly mobile, Chinese American Christians [YUMCHAs] view many of the Chinese churches in the New York Metropolitan as urban-immigrant ghettos.) It may sound like a stretch, but I believe that the current political climate of racial non-recognition contributes to the perception that Asian Pacific American ethnic-racial identities are optional.

A third reason why Asian Pacific American congregations may not survive in the future is due to the disconnect between an earlier generation of Asian Pacific American theologians and the emerging younger evangelical Asian Pacific American leadership. Earlier leaders, such as Paul Nagano, Jitsuo Morikawa, Roy Sano, James Chuck, and ecumenical efforts such as PAACCE and PACTS unabashedly affirmed their Asian Pacific American identities and sought to provide biblical and theological reflections that would support Christian forms of Asian American consciousness. However, the younger evangelicals have yet to do sustained biblical-theological work that would show the need to support Asian immigrant or pan-Asian congregations. In many cases, because the theological perspectives of the older generation emerge out of experiences in mainline Protestantism, many of the younger evangelicals either hesitate to consider them or are unfamiliar with their works. Furthermore, I believe that on a "popular" level there are biblical-theological perspectives which universalize Christian identity while erasing particular identities. I will call this a "totalitarian" Christian discipleship which is rooted in a "gnostic" dualism between "spirit and flesh." One of the consequences of such thinking is the desire to escape one's particular identities so that one can become simply a "Christian." "Why deal with the politics of denominational life? Why make a big deal about one's ethnic or racial background? All that matters is being a Christian," this theology suggests. This "popular" level theology, which I will say more about later, has greater influence on younger Asian Pacific American Christians today than the more "racial-ethnic-centered" theological views of an earlier generation of Asian Pacific American pastors.

A Postethnic View: Should Asian Pacific American Congregations Survive?

Now all these developments may actually be good. Why should any Asian Pacific American Christian feel compelled to join an Asian Pacific American congregation or care about the political goals of an Asian Pacific American consciousness? After all, "Asian American" is a politically constructed term designed to address discrimination. If Asian Pacific Americans face little discrimination in society and by the church, then individuals ought to be free to affiliate or not affiliate with Asian Pacific American

organizations or churches. Historian David Hollinger has suggested that these changing social realities now require a "postethnic" perspective. A "postethnic" perspective does not mean that Americans must erase their ethnic or racial identities and assimilate into a dominant culture. However, it does call into question the rigidity and imposition of the five recognized racial power "blocs" (European-, African-, Hispanic-, Asian-, and Native- American). Just as it was wrong to impose Anglo-conformity earlier this century, Hollinger believes that it is equally wrong to force everyone to assimilate into one of the five racial groupings. Thus, he favors a "postethnic" approach which "favors voluntary over involuntary affiliations, balances an appreciation for communities of descent with a determination to make room for new communities, and promotes solidarities of wide scope that incorporates people with different ethnic and racial backgrounds."⁷ In other words, he is arguing for individuals to freely choose how much or how little they wish to affiliate with racial, ethnic, or other identity-based groups. Eric Liu, who agrees with Hollinger, expresses it this way:

Don't get me wrong: it's not that I wish for a society without race. At bottom, I consider myself an identity libertarian. I wish for a society that treats race as an option, the way white people today are able to enjoy ethnicity as an option. As something cost-free, neutral, fluid."⁸

African American, Native American, and Hispanic congregations may need to exist in order to sustain themselves in the face of racial discrimination. Perhaps Asian Pacific American Christians do not have to. Maybe Liu is correct when he suggests that an Asian Pacific American consciousness "was but a cocoon: something useful, something to outgrow."⁹ And maybe Asian Pacific American Christians, who seem to experience less discrimination than other racial groups, have outgrown the need for an Asian Pacific American consciousness. Therefore, the replacement of future Asian Pacific American congregations by multi-racial ones may indeed be a step in the right direction.

The Bible appears to favor this, too. Paul says in Ephesians 2:14-15 that Christ "is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups (Jews and Gentiles) into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that

is, the hostility between us. He has abolished the law with its commandments and ordinances, that he might create in himself one new humanity in place of the two, thus making peace." In Gal. 3:26-28 "for in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith. ²⁷As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. ²⁸There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus." In the Acts of the Apostles, it appears that Paul's efforts to welcome the Gentiles into the church without imposing Jewish customs upon them further suggest that our racial and ethnic identities need to be subordinated (or relativized) in order for us to partake of a new identity in Christ.

Does this suggest that the ideal Christian congregation should be color-blind or race-neutral? Shouldn't we all be integrating our congregations so that they can become as culturally diverse as possible? Should we therefore eliminate the "Asian Ministries" desk at Valley Forge and the Asian American Baptist Caucus? After all, these ways of acting upon our racial differences look like "affirmative action" programs (depending on one's vantage point, such programs could also be viewed as "evangelistic outreach" to people who are disproportionately unchurched!). In a "postethnic" future which calls into question rigid racial boundaries, can racially-based churches, mission programs, and caucuses survive? Should they? If "postethnicity" is viewed positively, then should we work towards the dissolution of distinctly Asian Pacific American congregations? Should we aspire to become multi-racial and demonstrate racial reconciliation in our congregations?

Prophetic Witnesses: An Asian Pacific American Christian Future

I believe that Asian Pacific American congregations have a future as viable Christian communities despite or even because of this "postethnic" challenge. Most Asian Pacific American congregations will not dissolve or evolve into multi-racial churches, though I believe that there will be more and more pan-Asian congregations patterned after our very own Evergreen Baptist Church in Los Angeles. Most Asian Pacific American Christians will not join non-Asian Pacific American congregations. But unless the

ambivalence about staying in an Asian Pacific American context is addressed biblically, theologically, sociologically, and pastorally, Asian Pacific American congregations will not effectively reach the more than ninety percent unchurched Asian Pacific Americans. Indeed, the only persons addressing this ambivalence about Asian Pacific American identity are activists, scholars, and artists who seek to awaken Asian Pacific American consciousness for the sake of empowering the communities for social change.¹⁰ In the following, I hope to articulate some ways of thinking biblically-theologically and sociologically in a manner which would value the "postethnic" resistance to imposing "racial bloc" identities upon Asian Pacific Americans. At the same time, I will suggest that a "postethnic" approach gives us the freedom to organize our congregations, missions, and caucuses along racial-ethnic lines—if done for the right reasons.

Biblical-Theological Foundation

Overcoming Distorted Readings of Paul: Perhaps the most creative theologian today who is addressing the issues of identity and difference is Yale Divinity School Professor, Miroslav Volf (formerly at Fuller Theological Seminary). While we were working on a theology project together a few years ago, he introduced our workgroup to his book, *Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation*. In the first chapter, he addresses biblical scholar Paul Boyarin's argument that Paul's desire to embrace Gentiles caused him to devalue the Jewish Law so much that he was willing to erase all ethnic and cultural particularities in order to build up the universal Church of Christ.¹¹

According to Boyarin, Paul believes that we must break free from our particularities—whether they be race, class, or gender—in order to fully experience the grace that God provides. Thus, as the passages in Galatians and Ephesians seem to imply, becoming a Christian means partaking in a community that is not bound to any human culture because Christ was not bound to any human culture.

Boyarin's reading of Paul is very similar to a "popular" theology which finds itself in liberal, evangelical, and even "new age" thought. He views Paul as a "gnostic," or one so influenced by a

Hellenist (specifically Platonic or Neoplatonic) mindset. In other words, Paul's goal in welcoming Gentiles into the Church is to bring all peoples of the earth into a spiritual realm and escape the fleshly world. If Jewish history or customs were obstacles, then simply do away with them! After all, just as Christ was able to overcome flesh in his resurrection, Christians should also be liberated from the human bondage of culture. How often have I heard people suggest that becoming a Christian exempts them from dealing with the "blood and mud" of human politics and culture?

Volf argues that Boyarin has misread Paul. Some portions of Paul's writings show that certain Jewish practices needed to be done away with for the sake of Christ, but this does not mean that Paul wanted to escape all human particularities. Paul did not envision a "disincarnate transcendence, but the crucified and resurrected Jesus Christ" who has "a body that has suffered on the cross." Volf continues: "In subsequent centuries Christian theologians have arguably made the particularity of Christ's body the foundation of the reinterpretation of platonic tradition. As Augustine puts it, he discovered in the Neoplatonists that 'In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God,' but did *not* find there that 'the Word became flesh and dwelt among us.' (*Confessions* VII, 9). The grounding of unity and universality in the scandalous *particularity of the suffering body* of God's Messiah is what makes Paul's thought structurally so profoundly different" from Boyarin's view.¹²

Thus, the "scandal of particularity" makes it impossible for Christians to read Paul in a "gnostic" or Platonic way. Our ethnic and racial identities may not be rigid and fixed, but they are still part of who we are as humans, created by God. In the crucifixion, God demonstrates that He cares for our particularities. In the incarnation, God reveals his suffering love for his Creation. Throughout Scripture and the "orthodox" Christian tradition, God the Redeemer is identified as God the Creator. Therefore, we are to honor our earthly particularities as gifts of the Creator even as we worship only the Giver. Our ethnic and racial identities have intrinsic value to God. Thus, we would be mistaken to exchange our earthbound particularities for a distorted interpretation of Paul. We would be mistaken to think that heaven or the Church is a place where our particularities are erased or dissolved.

The Mission of "Resident Aliens": Another theological perspective that can be misinterpreted is that represented by Stanley Hauerwas and William Willimon. In their now classic *Resident Aliens: Life in the Christian Colony*, they argue that the Church of Christ is as much a sociological reality as nation states and ethnic groups. It is a culture formed by the biblical witness and Christian tradition, thus, should be respected as a counter-cultural community; one that is in, but not of this world. Consequently, the Church should not compromise its identity to support any political or worldly agendas. The great sin of the Church, they argue, has been its captivity to the "world's" agenda—what they call "Constantinianism."¹³ This results in allowing the world to define the role, function, and mission of the church. For example, in the minds of most people in our society, the church is supposed to uphold a culture's morality system or social service to the poor. Furthermore, Christians are to keep their religion a private matter so that they do not challenge society's *status quo*. The church, they argue must avoid "Constantinianism" by returning to its New Testament roots.

This, I believe, is a fundamentally sound argument. As an American Baptist, this theology resonates with me. However, it can also be misinterpreted. Some think that if the Christian community has its own distinct biblically-shaped culture, then all other particularities ought to be erased. Others think that issues of race relations are part of the "world's agenda" so they ought not be brought into the church. In response to the first distortion, I refer the above section about misreading Paul. In addition, none of these theologians would say that Christian identity erases all other identities. To suggest this is to incorporate the methods of "identity imperialism" or "totalitarianism" into the church. All of these theologians would say that different people express Christian identity in diverse ways, but the biblical narrative is what holds all Christians together.

The question of whether issues of "race relations" are worldly matters foreign to the church is a more difficult one to address. Few people today, I think, will deny that the involvement of Christians in the Civil Rights movement was an expression of Christian faith and mission. In fact, I would argue that the struggle for human rights and social justice is not a "worldly" matter which the church should avoid.

Rather, these concerns are central to the biblical narrative. The central thrust of Scripture reveals a God who is very much concerned with redeeming a world fallen into and crushed down by sin. God is very much concerned about both the perpetrators and victims of sin. God wants to see the original intentions of Creation fulfilled in the coming Kingdom. Moreover, in Scripture, God has always chosen a people to be the messengers of the promise of redemption in Jesus, the Messiah. Christians are to fulfill the Abrahamic covenant to be a "blessing to the world" through both personal evangelism and social justice efforts. Thus, conversations about race relations and social justice are not foreign to the biblical witness at all. If anything, what is amiss among those who think race relations is alien to the Church, is a truncated understanding of the biblical mission of the Church.

Furthermore, a distorted understanding of the history of American Christianity also creates a feeling of distance from talk about social justice and race relations. I suggest that one read Donald Dayton's *Discovering an Evangelical Heritage* to get a sense of how central social justice was to nineteenth-century evangelicalism. The first abolitionists, women's rights advocates, and social reform activists were evangelicals who were converted by evangelists like Charles Finney.

Therefore, it is entirely appropriate for Christians to address matters related to race and racism. Once we are allowed to talk about the historical realities of race and racism in our congregations, we can then address the serious questions concerning whether it is legitimate to organize Asian Pacific American ministries and congregations along racial lines.

Assessing the Impact of Anti-Asian Racism

In my research on Chinese Protestantism in North America, I interviewed many Chinese pastors about their faith journeys and worldviews. Two questions I asked always caused my interviewees to hesitate: (1) why should we minister exclusively to Chinese people? (2) did or would you ever consider serving in a non-Chinese congregation? The overwhelming majority of the responses were couched in the language of personal call or pragmatic explanations. Respondents said they would not consider shepherding non-

Chinese congregations because they were called to serve the Chinese. Moreover, the rationale for ministering exclusively to Chinese people was due to the practical need for pastors who understood the language and culture. Undoubtedly, these pastors were called to serve in Chinese (in some cases, pan-Asian) churches. However, one would expect God to call many more Chinese to pastor non-Chinese churches if we were truly becoming a postethnic society. Perhaps God is calling many Asian Pacific Americans to pastor non-Asian congregations, but God's people are not hearing the call?

What this point illustrates is that race and racism is still alive and continues to affect Asian Pacific American Christians. The inability or unwillingness of the Chinese pastors to talk about their ministry in terms of racial discrimination also shows that many of our Asian Pacific American Christian leaders have yet to wrestle with or value the historical experience and contemporary reality of Asian Pacific Americans. Nevertheless, the lack of engagement on the part of our Asian Pacific American Christian leaders with race and racism is understandable, though not, in my opinion, justifiable. Two underlying sociological assumptions appear to be dominant in the way Asian Pacific American Christian leaders talk about the Asian Pacific American community and the future of Asian Pacific American congregations. Both emerge from social scientific theories that equate the experiences of Asian Pacific Americans with those of European immigrants earlier this century. The first assumption is that the type of "discrimination" Asians experience is more like the kind experienced by European immigrants than the kind experienced by African Americans. This discrimination will eventually disappear as Asian Pacific Americans assimilate into American society. Which leads to the second assumption: namely, that Asian Pacific Americans will assimilate just as the European immigrants assimilated. Thus, there seems to be a widespread belief even among Asian Pacific American Christians that if immigration from Asia ceases, there will no longer be need for Asian language congregations. Therefore, the Asian Pacific American churches are only temporary. Eventually their children will join the mainstream churches. In other words, "assimilationist" sociologists took the European immigrant experience and transposed them on African and Asian Americans.

However, these assumptions are questionable precisely because they do not take into consideration the fact that Asian Pacific Americans are not treated like European immigrants—nor are they treated like African Americans. Mia Tuan's important study of third through fifth generation Chinese and Japanese in California demonstrates this point. In her recent book, *Forever Foreigners or Honorary Whites? The Asian Ethnic Experience Today*, Tuan discovers that, unlike second and third generation European immigrants, Asian Pacific Americans, who otherwise have achieved high educational and professional status or have been raised in America, cannot easily integrate into white mainstream America, despite media portraits of Asian Pacific Americans as "model minorities." Like middle or upper class African Americans, their physical features—something Asian Pacific Americans and African Americans cannot control—are still obstacles for full integration. Furthermore, unlike African Americans, Asian Pacific Americans cannot avoid the tinge of "foreignness." Therefore, despite the fact that middle class, third through fifth generation Asian Pacific Americans, like children of European immigrants, have acquired some degree of freedom to chose their ethnic identities in private, they do not have this freedom in public. In other words, contrary to Eric Liu's belief (along with many Asian Pacific American Christians), "white privilege" continues to create a climate of anti-Asian racism in this country. Tuan concludes:

I am skeptical that within a few generations Asian-Americans would *automatically* be absorbed into the mainstream. Generations of highly acculturated Asian ethnics who speak without an accent have lived in this country, and yet most white Americans have not heard of or ever really seen them. They are America's invisible citizenry, the accountants who do our taxes, engineers who safeguard our infrastructures, and pharmacists who fill our prescriptions. Nevertheless, over the years they have continued to be treated and seen as other."¹⁴

Like "assimilationist" sociologists, "postethnic" advocates exhibit the same unwillingness to address the problem of racism. What the "postethnic" perspective does not take seriously is that the "ethnic options" which children of European immigrants possess is a "white privilege" people of color do not have.

Therefore, while it is comforting to know that many racial boundaries are blurring and people feel freer to marry across racial lines, I am concerned that this will give the impression that "racism" is no longer a problem in society and in our churches.

On the other hand, unlike those who would talk about a "colorblind" society, the "postethnic" perspective respects the right and freedom of people to organize along race lines. Instead of expecting people naturally to "fit into" one of the five "racial blocs," race-based organizations now must work harder and more consciously at recruiting volunteers to support their causes. They must also respect the right of individuals not to join their organizations. But, most importantly, they must recognize that they cannot make their "race" their ultimate concern. The "postethnic" perspective reminds Asian Pacific American Christians that our ultimate value is not to be placed in our racial identities, but in the God who transcends, yet is deeply concerned about, all cultures.

I recognize how uncomfortable it is to talk about these points in a setting where we want to affirm a Christian fellowship of love. And believe me, Martin Luther King, Jr.'s vision of the "beloved community" is at the core of my Christian beliefs. However, it seems that in our conversation about the future of Asian Pacific American Christianity we need to "speak the truth in love." It is difficult to talk about "white privilege" in an Asian Pacific American congregation when many of our members have married Caucasians. It is uncomfortable to talk about experiencing anti-Asian discrimination in the presence of our Caucasian brothers and sisters in Christ. The easiest thing to do is to ignore both terms or to subordinate our concerns as Asian Pacific Americans under a race-neutral banner. The second easiest thing to do is to "solve the problem" by talking about "racial reconciliation"—though in the minds of most Christians, the races that seem to need to reconcile the most are Blacks and Whites, not Asians and Whites (Asian-Black racial reconciliation is even further off the radar). The third easiest thing to do would be to accept the views of scholars of assimilation and allow our Asian Pacific American congregations to become other than Asian Pacific American.

However, despite the discomfort of confronting "white privilege" and addressing the discrimination that the Asian Pacific American members in our congregations face, I believe that it is our responsibility as

Asian Pacific American Christians to deal with it. Unless we speak openly of "white privilege" and "racism" we will not be able to discern the difference between idolatry and the Gospel of Christ. Furthermore, we do the Caucasian and bi-racial members of our congregations a disservice by shielding from them the real pains Asian Pacific Americans experience in North American society. **But if we truly wish to repudiate the idolatry of "white privilege" I am convinced that we in North America dare not neglect the spiritual discipline of reflecting on Christ's identification with the historical and contemporary "racial suffering."** The idolatry of racism and "white privilege" hurts everyone, including Caucasian sisters and brothers in Christ. We, therefore, dare not study the Bible or do theological reflection without taking into consideration the historical context in which we live today. If we take these contexts seriously, we will be able to develop frameworks for thinking creatively about the future of not just Asian Pacific American Christianity, but also of all Christianity in the United States.

Being a Prophetic Community of Faith

Having laid down the biblical-theological foundations for recognizing the necessity of Asian Pacific American congregations to exist, having suggested that our analysis of the Asian Pacific American situation is deficient unless we account for the persistence of anti-Asian racism in North American society, what can we say about the future of Asian Pacific American congregations? Why should the Asian Pacific American church continue, whether in the form of ethnic immigrant churches or pan-Asian congregations?

I want to propose that the existence and mission of Asian Pacific American Christianity is to be a prophetic witness against the idolatries of racism and "white privilege" in North American society and churches. In this sense, the Asian Pacific American church stands in the prophetic tradition of the Old Testament, which calls Israel to accountability for its sins. Stated more positively, Asian Pacific American Christianity is a prophetic community of faith that will help guide American Christianity towards the global, multi-racial, multi-lingual, and yet-to-be-realized Reign of God in Christ. In this

sense, the Asian Pacific American church stands within Christ's "Great Commission" that was inaugurated at Pentecost. But in order for the Asian Pacific American church to be a prophetic community of faith, there must be awakened within it a Christian Asian Pacific American consciousness. Our older generation called it an Asian American theology of liberation, though as an evangelical, I prefer to see it as an Asian Pacific American consciousness which sees our Christian faith in a new light—one that affirms Asian Pacific Americans. Otherwise, we will uncritically imbibe theological perspectives from popular, liberal, conservative, and "new age" sources that will only create greater self-contempt (what Dr. Ken Fong calls "Asian American self-hatred"). What can a Christian Asian Pacific American consciousness look like? Here are some very perfunctory ideas.

1. A Christian Asian Pacific American consciousness seeks to organize Christian Asian Pacific Americans along racial lines as a prophetic critique against the idolatries of racism and as a proclamation of the truly worldwide reign of Christ. Therefore, Asian Pacific American Christians do not form congregations, organizations, or caucuses to separate from the rest of the Church. Rather, they organize to free our brothers and sisters in Christ from the Euro-American cultural captivity of the Gospel.
2. A Christian Asian Pacific American consciousness recognizes that racism in society and the American church are obstacles for the advancement of the Gospel among Asian Pacific American communities. Hence, the existence of Asian Pacific American Christians emphasizes that reaching Asian Pacific Americans for Christ is a priority for the American church.
3. A Christian Asian Pacific American consciousness critically assesses secular Asian Pacific American movements and consciousness raising. While recognizing the truths found in Asian American studies, it will also critique distortions or uninformed perceptions of religion.
4. A Christian Asian Pacific American consciousness shall always embrace non-Asian Pacific Americans with love, though it will have as its priority developing Christian Asian Pacific American leaders for the Church and the world. This is a priority that Christian Asian Pacific Americans expect non-Asian Pacific Americans to understand.

Conclusion

Racial separation is clearly offensive to God. However, so is racial injustice or privileging. In North America, the only justification for maintaining racially separate congregations is the recognition of the historical and contemporary reality of racism and white racial privileging—a sin that permeates our society, our denomination, our congregations, and each of us individually. Even in a "postethnic America," there needs to be a voice that speaks to this and points to the Reign of God. I believe God is calling Asian Pacific American Christians for such as time as this—to question the assumptions of our society (such as the "model minority") and to show the way to the future of Christianity in North America.

NOTES

¹ This article originally was presented as a paper for the Japanese Baptist Church, Seattle Centennial Celebration, on May 22, 1999. ² This article originally was presented as a paper for the Japanese Baptist Church, Seattle Centennial Celebration, on May 22, 1999.

² Eric Liu, *The Accidental Asian: Notes of a Native Speaker* (New York: Random House, 1998), 82.

³ David Cho, "Asian Americans' changing face of Christianity on campus," *The Philadelphia Inquirer* (Feb. 2, 1999): R1, 4; Rudy Busto, "The Gospel According to the Model Minority? Hazarding an Interpretation of Asian American Evangelical College Students," *Amerasia Journal* 22: 1 (1996): 133-147.

⁴ See Yen Le Espiritu, *Asian American Panethnicity: Bridging Institutions and Identities* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1992).

⁵ Jere Takahashi, *Nisei/Sansei: Shifting Japanese American Identities and Politics* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1997):

206.

⁶ Eric Liu, 78.

⁷ David A. Hollinger, *Postethnic America: Beyond Multiculturalism* (New York: BasicBooks, 1995), 3.

⁸ Eric Liu, 65.

⁹ Eric Liu, 83.

¹⁰ William Wei, *The Asian American Movement*, (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1993); Lisa Lowe, *Immigrant Acts: On Asian American Cultural Politics* (Chapel Hill, NC: Duke University Press, 1996).

¹¹ Daniel Boyarin, *A Radical Jew: Paul and the Politics of Identity* (Berkeley, 1994).

¹² *Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1996): 47.

¹³ This view was originally inspired by the Anabaptist John H. Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus* and George Lindbeck's narrative theology and continues in Rodney Clapp, *A Particular People* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1996).

¹⁴ Mia Tuan, *Forever Foreigners or Honorary Whites? The Asian Ethnic Experience Today* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1998), 159.