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## EITHER IGNORANCE OR SIN?

Luke 15:16-19

Hitoshi (Paul) Fukue

It is sometimes said that the religious life of many Asian people deals with suffering instead of sin, ignorance instead of guilt consciousness, especially among those people who have been influenced by Hinduistic and Buddhistic worldviews. One missiologist's observation seems to demonstrate this typical view. In speaking on Buddhistic worldview, he says,

A person's problem is not understood in terms of sin but in terms of suffering. Ignorance of the true nature of his present state and the way of deliverance is pandemic and must be dispelled by the preaching of Buddha's message.<sup>1</sup>

In speaking on how to communicate Christ to these people, he emphasizes that these people must be helped to understand that their problem is rebellion against God rather than ignorance. In other words, often the question on the part of Christian workers working among Asians has been how to communicate Christ to people who do not seem to have clear consciousness of sin and guilt before the omniscient God. So the important task for Christian pastors and missionaries has been how to raise sin consciousness among Asian people in order to communicate the atoning work of Christ correctly.

In traditional theology (in our Wesleyan tradition primarily) the definition of sin has been understood as a willful transgression of the known law of God. However, I wonder whether we can really draw such a clear line between sin and ignorance and suffering. In some cases I am sure we can make clear distinctions among these realities and there are necessities to do so. But I believe these concepts in fact overlap with each other in many ways and when we preach about the atoning work of Christ,

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<sup>1</sup>David J. Hesselgrave, *Communicating Christ Cross-Culturally* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1991), 243.

I believe we have a need to address suffering and ignorance as well as sin and guilt.

Our biblical faith clearly states that the blood of the Lamb of God takes away the sin of the world. There is no question about this and this is our crucial message to the whole world. But our Bible also speaks about suffering in relation to Christ's atoning work.

He endured the suffering that should have been ours, the pain that we should have borne. We are healed by the punishment he suffered, made whole by the blows he received (Isaiah 53).

There is no doubt that Christ atoned for our sins, if we understand the whole Bible.

But I wonder whether in our theology we have not neglected the fact that Christ's atonement was to solve the problem of human suffering as well. We preach Christ died for our sins, but should we not also preach Christ who died for our suffering. And the good news is not only our sins are forgiven, but also our suffering is healed.

Now as I say this, we immediately encounter a problem in this statement, because many times our physical and mental sufferings do not necessarily disappear however sincerely and truthfully we believe in the atoning work of Christ. In some cases our physical and mental suffering become even more acute after we believe in Christ and His salvation. So in consequence we tend to shy away from proclaiming that Christ died for our suffering as well as for our sins. But I believe we need to understand the meaning of suffering in its depth. Our real suffering is not physical or mental, however keenly we might feel them, but rather our deepest and ultimate suffering comes from our breach from our Creator God. Our ultimate suffering and pain come from the separation from our heavenly Father.

In the same way, ignorance is also an underlying cause of the separation from our heavenly Father. Let's take the prodigal son in Jesus' parable as an example. The Bible witnesses that the prodigal son began to feel that he had offended his father and his heavenly Father "when he came to his senses" (Luke 15:17). The son did not know any better. It is unlikely that he willfully intended to offend and rebel against his father. We can say that he had no intention of sinning against his father nor God. Perhaps out of his youthful ambition and desire and passion, he simply wanted to explore different things in life and enlarge his vision. Surely he was also tempted by the pleasures of this world. But I find it difficult to say that he willfully and intentionally desired to hurt the feelings of his father. He simply didn't know any better. He was blinded by the things of this world. He was

ignorant of the loving heart of his father. But when he fell into the bottom of his life, he realized what he had done. He realized his ignorance which led him to his senses of sin against his father and at the same time against God. Ignorance was inseparably related to his consciousness of sin.

Therefore, I personally find it difficult to say that people under Hinduistic and Buddhistic worldview usually do not deal with the problem of sin but suffering and ignorance. These concepts are in fact closely related and their relatedness are witnessed in the Scripture itself. And Christ came to our world to free us from our ignorance of the heart of God, from our deepest suffering and pain which are separation from our heavenly Father, as well as from our guilt and sins against Him.

When Christ uttered that anguished prayer on the Cross, "Father, forgive them for they **do not know** what they do," I believe that Christ was dealing with human ignorance concerning the hurting heart of God. If we can develop a theology of ignorance and suffering more, I believe we can better communicate the gospel to many many more Asians for Christ. This is only a burgeoning thought of mine as an Asian student of theology. So anybody can respond to this thought of mine and correct me where I am ignorant. Then I will begin to suffer.