SOUTH EAST ASIA GRADUATE SCHOOL OF THEOLOGY

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MISSION AS CREATION OF COMMUNITIES:

A Biblical Storytheology of Mission

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GEORGE O. BUENAVENTURA

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ABSTRACT

Mission is the lifeblood of the Christian Church. In fact, mission precedes the church. Mission is the mandate of both the Old and the New Testaments. The church exists through, by and for mission. Mission is not the product of the church; rather the church is the offspring of mission. The church is the offspring of mission, and not mission as the product of the church.

Christianity, which started in West Asia, was brought to other parts of Asia, including the Philippines, through foreign missions from Europe and North America. It came to this part of Asia, including the Philippines, simultaneously with the coming of foreign colonizers. The Bible and the cross came together with the swords of the Spaniards in the 16th century and the cannons and rifles of the Dutch, British and the Americans.

On April 26, 1901, the Protestant foreign missionaries constituting the Evangelical Union, signed an agreement to formally divide the Philippine territory among the various mission boards and societies, so that "the evangelization of these people will be more speedily accomplished by a division of the territory, thus avoiding waste of labor, time and money arising from the occupation of the same districts than one Society".[1] The one exception was the Bishop Brent of the Episcopal Church who, in refusing to join the comity agreement said, "I cannot feel it to be the duty of the Church which I represent to build up a constituency by deliberately drawing upon the Roman Church".[2] Consequently, the Episcopalians limited their work to the Americans, Chinese and other foreigners in

[1] T. Valentino Sitoy, Jr. *Comity and Unity* (Quezon City: NCCP Tugon, 1989) p. 13.

Manila, the Muslims and other non-Christian communities in Mindanao and the Igorots of the Mountain Province in Northern Luzon.[3] The act of dividing the land reflects the missionaries' view of doing mission. A year later, violations to the comity agreement were noted. For example, Dr. David Hibbard, the founder and president of Silliman Institute (now Silliman University) privately opined, "The whole scheme of division of territory does not amount to anything at all and ... within two years we will find the missionaries going wherever they find an opening. It is nice on paper and an interesting plan, but that is all".[4] And Dr. F. M. Rains, the Financial Secretary of Foreign Christian Missionary Society (Disciples) wrote to their first missionary to the Philippines Rev. W. H. Hanna, "We want you to establish churches of Christ wherever and among whomsoever you think advisable".[5] And later on, more territorial conflicts happened; such as the Presbyterian-Baptist conflict in the island of Panay.

The Bible was taught to a divided, colonized, subdued, exploited, and abused people by the colonizers. Protestant missions began this way. Its approach to mission has not changed to our day.

Asian Christianity has come of age. It has come to full awareness of the need re-read the scriptures through Asian eyes. The Bible is pregnant with stories of those who were at the margins or peripheries of ancient societies-- the persecuted, oppressed, perennially colonized, and discriminated communities.

Mission is a major theme that runs through the Bible. The Bible does not only mandate and legitimize mission, it also presents paradigms of doing mission.

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[3] Sitoy, p.16.
[4] Sitoy, p.17.
[4] Sitoy, p. 23
[5] Sitoy, p. 23

Using Ezra 7-10 as an axis for examining mission, this study aims to look into what do the major divisions of the scripture say about it. The Torah, the Prophets, Wisdom Writings and the Gospels will be the spokes or rays that are connected to Ezra as the center. In this study, the insights from the peripheries will critique the center.

The church is a community. God is a community. The existence persons, as well as God's existence, are all in relation to the 'Other' and 'others'. God exists in relation to God's creation and other persons in the Trinity: Father-Son-Holy Spirit. Only in communion can God be God. All things are related and interconnected. The Bible was written by and for communities. Re-reading it in the eyes of the community, particularly of the oppressed, victim-communities is consistent with its origins and original intention. Individualistic, privatistic societies have read the Bible before us and for us. Re-reading the scriptures by our own lenses is our urgent responsibility.

The goal and means of Christian mission is to build communities. Our pastoral task is lead and participates in building communities that make 'Christian life' possible. Eternal life is a relationship. Creation and salvation are both in relation to the Other. "But all spirituality, no matter what particular prayer form is used, must relate to people, because Christianity is about relationships. Christianity is a way of life. It is a journey made with others."[6]

Storytelling is a key ingredient in the creation of communities. The Bible narratives and people's stories are powerful vehicles in understanding God, life and relationships. Jesus' parables provoke, reorient and subvert all other previous

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[6] Niall O'Brien, *Island of Tears, Island of Hope* (Quezon City: Claretian Publications, 1993), p. 70.

conventional understandings of God, life and relationships. This study shows that short stories are beyond being academic. They are practical, life-transforming.

"Stories permeate every community and culture, whether in oral, written, visual, or enacted form."[7] "In both written and oral narrative, story creates community and is created by community. ... Stories are across culture, communal experiences. Stories and community emerge simultaneously."[8] Any Christian community is created and sustained through its experiences and stories of God. Without stories, communities would not exist, because their identity is held in their stories.[9] Faith is a way of life people learns from experiences within a faith community. The Bible is "The story of a people striving to achieve and maintain a life-giving community".[10]

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[7] Susan M. Shaw, *Storytelling in Religious Education,* (Alabama: Religious Education Press, 1999), p. 14.
[8] O'Brien, p. 72
[9] O'Brien, p. 73
[10] Anthony Ceresko, *Introduction to the Old Testament: A Liberation Perspective* (Quezon City: Claretian Publications, 2001), p. 15.

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