



Reconsidering Christopher Columbus and the Recovery of a Biblical Theology of Mission

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I had my first encounter with Columbus through a Japanese language textbook when I was a fifth grader in Korea under the educational system of the Japanese colonial rule. It was in the midst of the Second World War when Japan was engaged in military conflict in the Pacific against the allied forces. At that time, we were prohibited from playing baseball, basketball, or any sports that originated in the West or North America. In addition, any stories that dealt with Europe or North America were deleted from the textbooks. Strangely enough, however, even in this strong anti-western atmosphere, the story of Columbus remained a part of the Japanese language textbook and was admired by the other fifth graders.

The story of Columbus taught in that textbook went like this. After “the discovery of America,” friends of Columbus celebrated his achievement and held a party. In the party there was a contest to see who could get an egg to stand on the table. Of course, nobody was successful in keeping the egg from rolling over. Then Columbus took the egg, pounded the bottom, and placed the egg so that it would stand. Everybody in the party applauded and praised his ingenuity.

This story has bothered me ever since my fifth grade days. It seemed to me that the attitude of Columbus had been arrogant and he had cheated to make the egg stand. His friends had wanted to make an egg stand on the table naturally, but Columbus only succeeded by damaging the egg. Another greater question that bothered me was why the Japanese government allowed the students to learn about Columbus while any other stories dealing with Europe and North America were censored.

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Today, as I ponder on the sailing of Columbus to America and reconsider him in the year of his quincentenary, I clearly understand why the Japanese, colonial government allowed the students to learn about him and glorify his life. The answer is simple: the war of Japanese imperialism in Asia and the sailing of Columbus to the “new world” had exactly the same purpose. Both sought to conquer, enslave, and plunder innocent people in order to glorify and increase the wealth and power of another—in the first case the Japanese imperial army, and in the second, the Spanish Conquistadores. The Japanese discovered the political justification in the story of Columbus’ brutal subjugation of the Native American people to legitimize their own acts of imperialism and oppression of the people of Asia.

The Japanese empire after the Meiji restoration in 1868 was constantly engaging in wars of imperialism. Japan fought against China in 1894-95 and took over the island of Formosa or Taiwan. In 1904-05 Japan fought against Russia and colonized Korea. Japan further escalated its

imperialistic ambition and military actions in China, established the puppet state of Manchukuo in 1932, and engaged in all-out war against China in 1937. In the late 1930s and early 1940s, Japanese armed forces invaded French Indo-China and in 1941 attacked Pearl Harbor. The leaders of the Japanese empire found all these acts of military aggression and territorial expansion congenial with the spirit of Columbus—a criminal spirit of greed, denial of human rights, and unspeakable violence against hundreds of thousands of helpless people.

I. RETHINKING COLUMBUS—RETHINKING MISSION

The *New Catholic Encyclopedia* describes Columbus as “seaman, chartmaker, navigator, discoverer of America.” Throughout his life, “Columbus attempted to emulate St. Christopher, ‘the Christ bearer.’ Ardent in religious devotion, he desired to spread the Christian faith more than he wished for personal glory, wealth, and distinction.”¹ Without a doubt, Columbus was eager to Christianize the natives. However, Columbus did not want to spread the Christian faith to enrich the life of people by making a new relationship with God through faith in Christ, but rather to enslave the Native Americans to serve Christian nations of Europe. He clearly stated this purpose in a letter to Luis De Santangel, Comptroller of the Treasury of the King and Queen:

I presented them [the Indians] with a variety of things, in order to secure their affection, and that they may become Christians, and enter into the service of their Highnesses and the Castilian nation, and also aid us in procuring such things as they possess, and we stand in need of.²

Columbus also wrote in his diary (dated November 19, 1492), urging the Spanish royalty to convert the “Indians” to Christianity:

They very quickly learn such prayers as we repeat to them, and also make the sign of the cross. Your Highness should therefore adopt the resolution of con-

¹J. B. Heffernan, “Columbus, Christopher,” *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, vol. 3 (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1967) 1007.

²Christopher Columbus, *Journal of First Voyage to America with an Introduction by Van Wyck Brooks* (New York: Boni, 1924) 226.

verting them to Christianity, in which enterprise I am of opinion that a very short space of time would suffice to gain to our holy faith multitude of people.³

Columbus quickly added his real purpose for the “discovery of new world,” which was to gain great riches and “vast quantities of gold.” Again on December 23, 1492, he wrote: “Our Lord in his mercy directs me to where I may find the gold mine as I have many here who profess to be acquainted with it.”⁴

Columbus failed to find gold or gold mines, yet he often lied about this in his letters and diaries. On December 29, 1492, he wrote: “There is so much gold and in so many places, and in this island of Espanola.”⁵ Columbus and his men ordered the natives to bring quotas of gold; when they failed to bring the gold, their hands were chopped off and they bled to death.⁶ When

Columbus and his men were unable to acquire the gold, they resorted to becoming slave traders in order to justify the expenses for their trip. From the first voyage on, Columbus ordered the brutal seizure of the native islanders of the West Indies and transported them to Spain for sale as slaves. In 1495 Columbus and his men rounded up 1,500 native men, women, and children to fill up the ships. The ships did not have enough room for 1,500 people, so 500 of the strongest bodies were selected. Yet, even the healthiest and strongest could not survive, due to the inhuman conditions on the ships and the trauma of enslavement. Two hundred of them died in passage as a result of malnutrition, disease, and physical abuse.

Columbus and his men committed indescribable crimes against the very people who had welcomed and aided them. Columbus himself wrote about the kindness, hospitality, and innocence of the native people:

No request of anything from them is ever refused, but they rather invite acceptance of what they possess, and manifest such a generosity that they would give away their own hearts. Let the articles be of great or small value, they offer it readily, and receive anything which is tendered in return with perfect content.⁷

The culture of the Native Americans had highly-developed values of communal sharing and peaceful resolution of conflicts. Again Columbus wrote:

They do not possess iron, steel, or weapons and seem to have no inclination for the latter, being timorous to the last degree. They have an instrument consisting of a cane, taken while in seed, and headed with a sharp stick, but they never venture to use it.⁸

In spite of the gentleness of the native people, Columbus enslaved them in the name of “Christianity” and “the Trinity.” The question arises, was it Columbus’ misunderstanding of Christianity and Trinity that led him to such Christian ways of life? The answer is no. Columbus was a son of his time. Ultimately, the church bears the responsibility for producing such a criminal man and supporting such inhuman acts.

³Ibid., 27.

⁴Ibid., 138.

⁵Ibid., 152.

⁶Howard Zinn, *A People’s History of the United States* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1980) 3-6.

⁷Ibid., 226.

⁸Ibid., 225.

A year after Columbus’s “discovery of America” the office of the papacy in Rome issued a bull called *Inter caetera*. In this bull, Pope Alexander VI legitimated the sending of missionaries to the “New World” by the Portuguese and Spanish powers using revenues from the “discovered territories” for the purpose. The same pope issued another bull in 1501, *Examinae devotionis*, which more fully specified the collecting of tithes in the colonies and the use of the money for the “Christianization” of the people. In such ecclesiastical decisions, the church

justified the colonization and domination of the native people in other parts of the world by the European powers. Such theology was based on the notion of Christendom, the idea of a temporal kingdom under the spiritual authority of the Christian church, which developed in the medieval period. This theology taught that, outside of Christendom, there was no religion and therefore no culture, but only darkness and death. Since the natives did not have “religion,” they were destined to die, and often the murdering of the natives was justified. When any people in the so-called new world resisted the orders from the Christian kings and queens who claimed responsibility for extending the glory of the pope, whom they saw as the Vicar of Christ on earth, they were brutally murdered to the point of genocide.

Columbus and his men were not originators of the crimes of stealing, killing, and enslavement of the people. During the time of the crusades, from the eleventh to the fourteenth centuries, such crimes were already in practice by Christian soldiers, as a recent article shows:

Even their hard-bitten contemporaries were shocked by the terrible massacre that followed as the maddened crusaders rampaged through the city [Jerusalem] in a bloody catharsis.⁹

The church should have been the one to stand against such crimes. However, it was the church and church leaders who waged such cruelty. For example:

During the siege of Caesarea in the spring of 1101, two envoys of the beleaguered Muslim town reproached the patriarch of Jerusalem and the papal legate for having called on the crusaders to slay the Saracens and take their land, thereby contravening the Christian injunctions against murder and robbery. So reports the Genoese chronicler Caffaro, an eyewitness to that siege, who also relates that the patriarch brushed aside this criticism by telling the envoys that Caesarea, the city of Peter, belongs to the Christians by right, and those who impugn God’s law ought to be slain.¹⁰

Four hundred years later, in the time of Columbus, the teachings and attitudes of the church had substantially changed. The exploitation, colonization, conquest, and enslavement of people in other lands were more effectively carried out, using scientific knowledge and the wealth of Spain—money which had been confiscated from the properties of the Jews who were expelled by the Spanish inquisition. Columbus only added his own greed for gold and fame, and the situation in the “new world” became worse. The rich God-given islands of paradise in the West Indies became a place of poverty and suffering inflicted by the “Christian” invaders. Yet the church and church leaders did not change their

⁹Tim Severin, “Retracing the First Crusade,” *National Geographic* 176/3 (September, 1989) 361.

¹⁰Benjamin Z. Kedar, *Crusade and Mission* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University, 1984) 97.

attitudes, then or now. In the time of Columbus, Bartolome de las Casas, who wrote that “Spain deserved punishment for the destruction we have brought to the Indies,”¹¹ said about Columbus:

Many is the time I have wished that God would again inspire me and that I had Cicero's gift of eloquence to extol the indescribable service to God and to the world which Christopher Columbus rendered at the cost of such pain and dangers, such skill and expertise, when he so courageously discovered the New World.¹²

Today, many in the Roman Catholic Church still regard Columbus as the one who emulated Christopher, the Christ bearer. Amid such attitudes, it is no wonder that many young people criticize and leave the church. Manuel Ocampo, a Philippino painter who has been working in Los Angeles since 1986 and is considered one of the most prominent contemporary young artists, recently called Catholicism "one of the major oppressors of Third World cultures."¹³

And what about the Protestant churches? In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the Protestant countries of Northern Europe, Great Britain, and the new nation of the United States of America began to send missionaries abroad. Unfortunately, however, they too repeated the pattern of the earlier Roman Catholic mission. The mission activities of the Protestant churches were also closely identified with the exploration of newly acquired lands and the colonial interests of the European and North American countries. This is apparent in the Indian subcontinent colonized by England, Namibia colonized by Germany, Indonesia colonized by Holland, and the Philippines colonized by the United States.

The nineteenth century saw an increase in Protestant mission work, especially by the churches of the United States. During that time, Protestant theology and practice of mission were not much different than the Roman Catholic mission methods of previous centuries. Like the motives of their Roman Catholic counterparts, the motives of the Protestant missionaries were problematic. Often, the young men and women who went into the lands of the Native Americans, or to the Hawaiian Islands, or to other more distant parts of the world, came into the missionary vocation to demonstrate their spirit of patriotism. Those who responded to the "divine call" were often filled with a superiority complex and tended to perceive different ethnic, national, and cultural traditions as inferior or contrary to Christianity; they were to be subverted and destroyed. Many churches and missionaries identified their Christian mission with the "special destiny" of the United States. Such mission was often identified as the worldwide mission of "moral reform," which was dictated by American Protestant standards. As a result, American cultural expansion and commercial imperialism became closely identified with the mission movement of North American churches.

The first U.S. foreign missionary agency, organized in 1810, admonished its members with these words:

How can we better testify our appreciation of her free institutions than by

¹¹Bartolome de las Casas, *History of the Indies*, tr. and ed. by Andree Collard (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1971) x.

¹²*Ibid.*, 34-35.

¹³*Time* (November 18, 1991) 74.

laboring to plant them in other lands? For where the gospel goes in its purity and power, there will follow in its train the blessings of civilization, liberty, and good

government.¹⁴

Such identification of national interest and Christian mission produced strong paternalistic attitudes that were unsympathetic to the cultures and customs of the people to whom they were sent, and instead served as a justification for exploitation. The American missionaries maintained a strong American identity with extra-territorial rights. Just as Columbus and his men had arrogant attitudes toward the natives, the American missionaries even ignored the sovereignty of national governments. An instruction received by Dr. Peter Parker, a pioneering medical missionary in China, was a typical example:

The Christian missionary is not, therefore, to expect, and he is not to seek, the sanctions of heathen governments to his efforts to extend the gospel, but he is to go, with its heavenly message, directly to the people, wherever he can find them; and he is to proclaim its requirements and sanctions to them as individuals having souls for the salvation or loss of which they are themselves responsible.¹⁵

Just as the European Christians in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, the American missionaries in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries believed that their culture was superior to all other cultures. Becoming Christian thus often required converts to sever relationships with their native cultures. Thus, José Míguez Bonino, Argentinian theologian, rightly pointed out:

The missionary enterprise of the past 150 years is interwoven with the expansion of economic, political, and cultural influence of the Anglo-Saxon world, whether Catholic or Protestant. We from the Third World call this neo-colonialism or imperialism.¹⁶

II. PROPOSALS FOR THE CHURCHES

Now in the quincentennial anniversary of Columbus, the real purpose of this paper is not only to criticize Columbus and the past mistakes of the churches but to recover the biblical meaning of Christian mission on the basis of Christian ecclesiology. The Christian church is meant to be an assembly of people, inclusive of different nationalities, languages, cultures, and classes. It is the church's purpose to exist in the world to welcome all kinds of people who "will come from east and west and sit at the table with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven" (Matt 8:11). The ministry of Jesus Christ and his apostles was to cross boundaries and to go out to meet people. In this encounter, all people were received with kindness and grace. Christians were to be gentle and peaceful people to witness to the oneness of creation!

The cruel treatment of other people due to ethnic, class, and cultural differences is a violation of the doctrine of the church and a sin against God. In the church we are all children of God and heirs with Christ (Romans 8). We are to live together, share community, and serve one another. We are not strangers and sojourners but fellow citizens with the saints and members of God's household. In

¹⁴Clifton J. Phillips, *Protestant America and the Pagan World* (Cambridge: Harvard, 1968) 243.

¹⁵Ibid., 183.

¹⁶*Time* (December 27, 1982).

the community of faith, there should be no division by nation, race, or creed, and certainly no violent treatment of other people because of cultural differences. When the first church was founded in Jerusalem on the day of Pentecost, the people came from “every nation under heaven” (Acts 2:5).

To recover this true nature of the church’s mission to the world in this year of the 500th anniversary of Columbus sailing to the “new world,” I have three proposals.

First, let the churches and people confess the crimes and sins committed against our neighbors and environment. Let the people in the Christian community reflect not only upon American history—the genocide of Native Americans, the enslavement of Africans, the mistreatment of Asian railroad workers, and the discrimination against Chicanos—but also upon present violations against oppressed people and the destruction of the environment. Is there not room in the mainline Christian churches for real penitence and rebirth?

The second proposal is to let the United States honor its treaties with the Native Americans. It is scandalous that not a single treaty with the Native Americans has been kept or honored by the United States. However, there are still many important treaties to respect, involving fishing rights and territorial rights of Native Americans. By honoring existing treaties, the United States will do a tremendous service and make a contribution to saving Native Americans from poverty, depression, alcoholism, and environmental degradation. President George Bush said in his 1989 inaugural address: “Great nations like great men must keep their word. When America says something, America means it, whether a treaty or an agreement, or a vow made on marble steps.” We have read his lips, now we demand that he keep his word.

The third and final proposal is that the churches in North America open themselves to their new neighbors from other countries and to ethnic groups within their own countries. Let them share their wealth and repay those neighbors who have been forced into hunger, homelessness, and drug addiction. Let the churches pay more attention to being “leaven” at home than to sending missionaries to other parts of the world. In this age of the global village, the world is not in need of a Columbus celebration, but rather a celebration of the true Christian values of peace, justice, and love.