Liminality and the *Missio Dei*: An Asian American Theology of Mission

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Over the past century, the North American Church has gradually experienced a sense of marginalization, but only in recent decades has the church fully come to grips with this reality. Speaking on behalf of the North American Church, Hauerwas and Willimon write, "All sorts of Christians are waking up and realizing that it is no longer 'our world.'"[1] For those who have long held the centers of power and influence, any diminishment may seem like a step closer to marginalization. As Alan Roxburgh describes, "North American churches are … neither on the periphery nor on the margins, but are definitely in a new social location. For a church that has long assumed its monopoly over the private religious world of modernity's citizens, it does *feel like* living on the margins."[2] This perspective has led to various responses, many of them problematic. For instance, various Christian national and political movements, especially evangelical movements, have attempted to insert themselves—and have in some cases succeeded—into the centers of power to shape the nation's moral character in their image. Appeals to the government to prohibit abortion, same-sex marriage, gender reassignment, Critical Race Theory (CRT), and even vaccinations have taken on religious connotations. Evangelical groups have frequently alluded to the Judeo-Christian origins of the United States to envision a society that places them at the centers of power. In other words, many Christians in the United States still view their faith and religion as a dominant part of their society.

For those observing the state of the North American religious landscape from the peripheries, it may be odd to think of the North American Church as a marginalized group. In many respects, vestiges of Christendom still permeate American society and culture. David Bosch observes that even with these seismic shifts and the church's diminished role in the world, "Many of the old images live on, almost unchallenged."[3] Today, the North American Church finds itself at a critical moment. As Lesslie Newbigin writes, "We are forced to do something that the Western churches have never had to do since the days of their own birth—to discover the form and substance of a missionary church in terms that are valid in a world that has rejected the power and the influence of the Western nations."[4] This situation begs the question: How does the North American Church navigate the shifts in its newfound circumstances, and what resources can guide it to find new paths forward? The answer may not require a search outside but within the North American Church. One may find the solution operating in the peripheries of society, within the existing American ecclesial context of the ethnic minority church. This chapter aims to shed light upon the contributions of the Asian American Church and advance the church's theology of the

[1] Stanley Hauerwas and William H. Willimon, *Resident Aliens: Life in the Christian Colony* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1989), 17.

[2] Alan J. Roxburgh, *The Missionary Congregation, Leadership, and Liminality* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 1997), 15 (emphasis added).

[3] David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1991), 381.

[4] Lesslie Newbigin, *The Open Secret: Sketches for a Missionary Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1978), 6.

missio Dei by developing a theology that considers their experience of liminality. In particular, the liminal experience of the Asian American Church can serve as a framework for understanding God's mission of mediatory presence, and this framework should serve as a missional model for the whole *ecclesia* of God. This chapter first identifies the Asian American ecclesial experience within the context of liminality. It then describes and grounds liminality as a missional paradigm for understanding the incarnational ministry of Jesus Christ, which leads the church to *communitas*, or authentic community. Finally, this chapter constructs a theology of mission that understands the significance of the Asian American liminal experience toward the church's mission.

Liminality, *Communitas*, and an Asian American Theology

To construct an Asian American theology of mission, one must begin with their context—the multiple liminalities that Asian Americans navigate regularly. Without understanding this context, theology proves abstract. All theology exists contextually in the histories, cultures, and experiences that shape the reception of God's revelation and its subsequent interpretation and dissemination. For Asian American theology, that context is liminality.

Liminality serves as a significant concept for understanding Asian American theology because it functions as the context in which many Asian Americans live in the social, political, theological, and ecclesial landscape of the West. Theologian Sang Hyun Lee was one of the earliest proponents of the term "liminality" to describe the Asian American ecclesial experience.[5] Lee opts for the term *liminal* rather than *marginal* to express the positive and constructive aspects of the given transitional space, thereby reclaiming the agency of Asian Americans who find themselves straddled "betwixt and between" two worlds. For him, a person enters into liminal spaces of their own volition, which allows for the possibility of creating new and brighter paths of solidarity and resistance.[6] Not all in-between spaces are voluntary but may be involuntary or coerced liminalities, which is another way to refer to one as marginalized. However, for Lee, viewing the space as liminal rather than marginal recovers some of the power and agency lost in the marginalization of individuals and communities pushed to the peripheries of society and opens up new and creative possibilities for theology previously unimagined.

Liminality

Liminality, an anthropological concept introduced by Arnold van Gennep and further developed by Victor Turner, describes a transitional period of an individual or collective moving from one social location, status, or condition to another. It characterizes the space of the movement between the separation (pre-liminal) from an initial state and the incorporation (post-liminal) to a newly realized structured state of being.[7] Individuals in liminality stand at the threshold between the old and the new, so they simultaneously identify with neither and both. They are "neither here nor there; they are betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention,

[5] Lee briefly introduces the term in his essay, "'Called to Be Pilgrims': Asian American Theology in Immigrant Perspective," in *Korean American Ministry: A Resource Book*, ed. Sang Hyun Lee and John V. Moore (Louisville: PCUSA, 1987), 39-65, and further develops it in his book, *From a Liminal Place: An Asian American Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2010).

[6] Lee, *From a Liminal Place*, 5.

[7] Arnold van Gennep, *The Rites of Passage*, trans. Monika B. Vizedom and Gabrielle L. Caffee (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1960), 21.

and ceremonial."[8] Liminality describes various rite of passage events in the life cycles of human cultures or mental and emotional periods of transition. For instance, religious and cultural ceremonies, such as *bar-mitzvahs* and *quinceañeras,* mark the culmination of a transitional process as children come of age. Less recognized but just as formative is the college or university experience, where the campus serves as a space for fostering transformation among students who move away from their parents' care to self-sufficiency and independence.[9] Liminality can also describe the migration experience of those who leave one country, culture, and custom to establish themselves in a new context.

A common experience shared among Asian American communities is the lack of incorporation into new structures of meaning in the United States. Thus, the Asian American migration experience is, according to Lee, one of perpetual liminality: "Asian Americans are still in the wilderness of in-between 'limbo,' not being able to be reincorporated fully into a social structure."[10] This liminal experience proves especially true for second-generation Asian Americans who are neither viewed as thoroughly American by the majority population (i.e., the perpetual foreigner) nor fully integrated with their cultures of ancestral origin.[11] Instead, Asian Americans stand in the narrow margin where the peripheries of both worlds intersect. This experience feeds into the stereotypical image of Asian Americans in the United States as perpetual foreigners.

Despite these challenges, liminality also has the potential for more constructive outcomes. It is the space, Lee argues, where "a person can become acutely aware of the problems of the existing structure" and therefore offer "alternative ideas of human relatedness and also with a desire to reform the existing social structure."[12] According to Peter Phan, being at the margins of multiple social contexts allows for new ways forward not limited to other cultures: "Belonging to both worlds and cultures, marginal(ized) persons have the opportunity to fuse them together and, out of their respective resource, fashion a new, different world, so that persons at the margins stand not only between these worlds and cultures but also *beyond* them."[13] In other words, liminality can be a catalyst for innovative thinking and transformative action.

Lee observes three positive aspects of liminality as he moves toward constructing an Asian American theology.[14] First, liminality reveals an openness to the new. Because one is not at the center of power, that person is also not bound by its rules, customs, or other normative behaviors or thought patterns. Instead, one remains free to explore alternative ways of thinking. Second, liminality creates opportunities for the emergence of *communitas*, or authentic human community,

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[8] Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (Chicago: Aldine Publishing, 1969), 95.

[9] Jessica Daniels, "Christian Higher Education as Sacred Liminal Space," *Christian Scholar's Review* 51, no. 2 (2022): 189–200.

[10] Lee, *From a Liminal Place*, 6.

[11] Koreans use the term *gyopo* to describe a Korean raised and enculturated with another country with negative connotations of varying degrees. According to Christian J. Park, "Ethnic Return Migration of Miguk Hanin (Korean Americans): Entanglement of Diaspora and Transnationalism," in *Diasporic Returns to the Ethnic Homeland: The Korean Diaspora in Comparative Perspective*, ed. Takeyuki Tsuda and Changzoo Song (Cham: Palgrave MacMillan, 2019), 122–24, *gyopo* "connotes co-ethnic subordinates living away from the center (the South Korean state). … It is also framed in a center/periphery model where the center is the South Korean nation-state and the periphery is Korean diaspora."

[12] Lee, *From a Liminal Place*, 6.

[13] Peter C. Phan, "Betwixt and Between: Doing Theology with Memory and Imagination," in *Journeys at the Margin: Toward an Autobiographical Theology in American-Asian Perspectives*, ed. Peter C. Phan and Jung Young Lee (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical, 1999), 113.

[14] Lee, *From a Liminal Place*, 7–11.

in which individuals "confront one another not as role players but as 'human totals,' integral beings who recognizantly share the same humanity."[15] *Communitas* entails relationality not based on social norms or constructs, such as ones defined by race, class, politics, or religion, but on individuals' shared identity as human beings—what Turner calls "social anti-structure."[16] Finally, liminality provides the creative space for prophetic knowledge and action. Because those who exist in the liminal stand not at the center but at the margins of society, they remain better positioned to critique the centers of power and influence.

Communitas

The three aspects of liminality—openness to the new, the emergence of *communitas*, and the creative space for prophetic knowledge and action—all relate. However, the formation of *communitas* serves as the overarching aspect incorporating the others, for *communitas* opens paths to new ways of thinking about humanity's communal and relational nature and prophetically orients the church toward an authentic community. So, further must be said about the notion of *communitas*.

In *The Ritual Process,* Turner uses *communitas* to differentiate between the general sense one gets from the term *community* and the authentic connection one gets from genuine relationality. One can live in a community by sharing common space and resources without achieving *communitas*. Turner locates the general notion of the community under the structures of society. On the one hand, societies are structured in ways that define specific communities of people, whether according to race, ethnicity, politics, gender, or religion. So, this might result in the Asian American community, the Muslim community, or the LGBTQ+ community. On the other hand, *communitas* "transgresses or dissolves the norms that govern structured and institutionalized relationships."[17] It transcends socially established norms. We see this in various pivotal moments in history when people transcended socially conditioned labels and came together in mutual solidarity. The societal lines that differentiated people dissolve in *communitas*, and individuals get drawn into genuine communal relations.

Turner equates this notion of *communitas* with Martin Buber's concept of *I* and *Thou*.[18] For Buber, genuine human relationality involves the relationship between the *I* and *Thou*, where the subjective *I* relates to the objective *Thou*, and the relationship is reciprocated so that a subject also exists as an object to another *I*. As such, an individual simultaneously exists as *I* and *Thou*. Buber refers to this genuine relationality that takes place between *I* and *Thou* as "community," and Turner further labels it as *communitas*, which entails "being no longer side by side but *with* one another … a turning to, a dynamic facing of, the other, a flowing from *I* to *Thou*."[19] This mutual relationality among individuals provides valuable context for understanding the significance of liminality.

One virtue that characterizes the Asian American Church is its emphasis on community. For instance, Helen Lee writes, "Given the Asian American temperament to place a high value on community and relationships, the experience of belonging to a community of Christians often leads

[15] Victor Turner, *Dramas, Fields, and Metaphors: Symbolic Action in Human Society* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1974), 269.

[16] Turner, *Dramas, Fields, and Metaphors*, 45.

[17] Turner, *Ritual Process*, 128.

[18] Turner, *Ritual Process*, 126–27. Cf. Martin Buber, *I and Thou*, trans. Ronald Gregor Smith (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1937).

[19] Martin Buber, *Between Man and Man*, trans. Ronald Gregor Smith (New York: Macmillan, 1965), 31 (emphasis original).

to an unbeliever placing their faith in Christ."[20] Likewise, Pyong Gap Min contends that "Asian Americans are more or less group-oriented, in sharp contrast to the individualism that characterizes American values."[21] Jung Young Lee attributes this to an Asian understanding of the self, saying, "*I am* is … pluralistic because it is relational. … In Asia *we-are* takes precedence over *I-am*, because the latter is always relative to the former. In other words, *I-am* is defined in terms of *we-are*, because we-are is considered to be more fundamental than *I-am*."[22] Conversely, American culture is caricatured by a deep sense of individualism. For instance, Soong-Chan Rah describes individualism as the "central theme of Western philosophy."[23] Individualism permeates American worldviews, structures, institutions, and even the church. Rah continues, "The American church, in taking its cues from Western … culture, has placed at the center of its theology and ecclesiology the primacy of the individual. … The church is more likely to reflect the individualism of Western philosophy than the value of community found in Scripture."[24] In short, many people see culture as pivotal in shaping one's perspective on relationships.

Based on these observations, one might assume that the cultural influences of their ancestries drive the communal character of Asian American Christianity. Likewise, one might also assume that the individualism of American Christianity also exists as a cultural phenomenon stemming from Western philosophies. However, this presumes a linear, logical progression of values originating from culture rather than the reverse. Social psychologists Geert Hofstede and Gert Jan Hofstede describe culture as a composite of symbols, heroes, rituals, and values, with values being the constant determinative element of culture. Values serve as "the core of culture" that deal with life's most basic yet essential questions, such as good and evil, right and wrong, moral and immoral, beautiful and ugly, and so on.[25] The collective experience then determines values. According to George Mandler, human experiences of congruity and incongruity within a given system and the subsequent emotional response shape our perceptions of that given system and add a value judgment upon it.[26] For instance, an individual who experiences suffering may attribute a negative value to that experience. A person who experiences forgiveness may elevate it as a virtue. In short, experiences inform values, and values shape cultures.

The notion of experience as the starting point culminating in culture proves significant because it removes culture as the definitive determining factor for value systems. Case in point, reducing the value of authentic community to a particular culture undermines the call for the whole church toward the formation of *communitas*, a significant aspect of the church's missionary calling. Thus, to assume that the value of community found in the Asian American Church results from their cultural backgrounds falls short of the dynamic that takes place in those communities. Such an assumption remains problematic for several reasons. For one, to speak of Asian culture is to not speak of culture at all but to minimize it. Instead, it involves speaking in generalities and

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[20] Helen Lee, "Hospitable Households: Evangelism," in *Growing Healthy Asian American Churches*, ed. Peter Cha, S. Steve Kang, and Helen Lee (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, 2006), 136.

[21] Pyong Gap Min, "An Overview of Asian Americans," in *Asian Americans: Contemporary Trends and Issues*, ed. Pyong Gap Min (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, 1995), 30.

[22] Jung Young Lee, *Marginality: The Key to Multicultural Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995), 8 (emphases added).

[23] Soong-Chan Rah, *The Next Evangelicalism: Freeing the Church from Western Cultural Captivity* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2009), 29.

[24] Rah, *Next Evangelicalism*, 29–30.

[25] Geert Hofstede and Gert Jan Hofstede, *Cultures and Organizations: Software of the Mind*, 2nd ed. (New York: McGraw Hill, 2005), 6–8.

[26] George Mandler, "Approaches to a Psychology of Value," in *The Origin of Values*, ed. Michael Hechter, Lynn Nadel, and Richard E. Michod (New York: Aldine de Gruyter, 1993), 229–58.

stereotypes, for no single normative "Asian culture" exists. One can speak of, to name a few, Korean, Vietnamese, or Hmong culture, but not of a specific Asian culture. Reducing Asians to a single group minimizes the diversity found among a multiplicity of cultures, thereby diluting the distinctiveness of each culture. Such assumptions also do not consider the divergent experiences between Asians and Asian Americans, diminishing the liminal experiences unique to the latter. While Asian Americans share some backgrounds with their ethnic kin, they also carry a sufficient historical and contextual distinctiveness to the degree that one cannot assume that speaking about one automatically applies to the other. Universities and colleges have recognized this, as many have now distinguished Asian American studies from Asian studies, as does the recent popular film *Crazy Rich Asians*.[27] It is this very distinction upon which the question of liminality hangs for Asian Americans who find themselves betwixt and between multiple worlds.

Additionally, attributing community values to cultural factors does not account for its presence in other ethnic groups. Take, for instance, the notion of *familismo* among Latinx communities. *Familismo* is the quality of having "a strong value placed on family relationships and obligation, the value of children and community, and the importance of intergenerational kinship networks."[28] Latinxs are also described as family and group-oriented, and some have observed similarities between Latinx and Asian cultures: "There are various cultural similarities between Asian and Latino parenting styles as they share many child-rearing practices that emphasize respect and obligation to one's self, family, and community."[29] Yet, other cultural aspects are patently distinct. In this case, culture cannot be the sole factor in valuing community.

Further, a high valuation for community is not limited to Asian, Latinx, or other ethnic cultures but even to so-called "individualist cultures" as well. Consider the phenomenon of Western expatriate communities. Whether it be Americans, Canadians, or others, individuals who have lived overseas for a sustained period have tended to find each other and gather to form new social relationships in a liminal context. This tendency is true among individuals who share the same nationality or ethnicity and just as true for those who do not share the same nationality or ethnicity but feel bonded by the simple fact that they live as expats attempting to navigate the same challenges of living in a foreign land.

Third, attributing communal values to a particular culture does not incentivize other, more so-called "individualist" cultures to adopt new communal patterns of living. If valuing community hinges on one's cultural background, then that provides little room for those not from that culture to buy into that virtue. Doing so would mean they must give up their cultural distinctiveness to participate in another's. On the contrary, Scripture and an overwhelming amount of contemporary theological and pastoral scholarship call all Christians to community.

If culture alone cannot account for the communal character of Asian American churches, then one must look elsewhere for answers. Rather than looking to culture as an answer to the question of authentic community, it is, in fact, the experience of liminality that forges the way toward a culture of *communitas*. This does not mean that culture has no role in shaping these

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[27] In the film, the Singapore-born matriarch, Eleanor Young, says to the Chinese American protagonist, "There is a Hokkien phrase: *kaki lang*. It means, 'Our own kind of people.' And you're not our own kind. … You're a foreigner, American." *Crazy Rich Asians*, directed by John M. Chu (Burbank, CA: Warner Bros. Pictures, 2018).

[28] Kristin E. Heyer, *Kinship Across Borders: A Christian Ethic of Immigration* (Washington DC: Georgetown University Press, 2012), 81.

[29] Jorge E. Gonzalez et al., "Family Literacy Practices and the Home Learning Environment of Asian and Latino Americans: Path to Literacy and Social-Emotional Learning," in *Family Literacy Practices in Asian and Latinx Families: Educational and Cultural Considerations*, ed. Jorge E. Gonzalez et al. (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2023), 60.

communal bonds. However, what truly bonds Asian Americans together is not foremost a shared cultural point of reference but a shared relational point of reference. The cultures of Asian communities vary in greater and lesser degrees. Likewise, the Asian migration experience is just as varied. Nevertheless, the commonality among Asians and Asian Americans—and other minority groups—is the experience of marginalization and liminality. Chinese Americans, for example, were not spared from discrimination during World War II, even though China fought with the Allied nations against Japan. Similarly, Asians, in general, were equally unspared from hate crimes during the COVID-19 crisis, even though the virus originated in a particular region of the world. In such cases, the nuances in ethnicities and cultures are moot when it comes to the marginalization of minority groups. This shared experience of liminality and *communitas* goes beyond the Asian community as well. For example, after the attacks on September 11, 2001, Japanese Americans rallied around the Arab-Muslim community, warning others not to repeat the tragedies stemming from their own experience of internment. Just a day after the attacks, Floyd Mori, then president of the Japanese American Citizens League, urged Americans "not to release their anger on innocent American citizens simply because of their ethnic origin, in this case Americans of Arab ancestry."[30] He continued, "While we deplore yesterday's acts, we must also protect the rights of citizens. Let us not make the same mistakes as a nation there were made in the hysteria of WWII following the attack at Pearl Harbor."[31] Actions such as these, and those taken by persons of influence such as then U.S. Secretary of Transportation Norman Mineta, helped shape the American response to the treatment of Arab Americans in the aftermath of the attacks.[32] In other words, Asian Americans live in a shared racialized and politicized liminal space.

The Liminality of the Incarnate Christ

The Asian American ecclesial experience brings to our attention the central place that liminality occupies in the life of the church because liminality exists as the space from which the people of God operate as they engage the world in mission. When interrogating Scripture through this interpretive lens, it remains evident that liminality is the model set by Jesus Christ in his incarnational mission and the subsequent developments in the early church's missional way of life. In other words, liminality is the *locus operandi* of the *missio Dei*.

Jesus and Liminality

Viewing the incarnation through the lens of liminality, we see God's movement between the pre-liminal (separation), liminal, and post-liminal (reincorporation) stages. In the second phase, the *missio Dei* receives its true meaning in the incarnation when the Father sends the Son in a transitional movement from heaven to earth. In the ascension, the Son returns in a post-liminal move back to the Father. Between these two movements, the *missio Dei* transpires within the liminal space. Christ stands between the beginning and end of history and space as one

[30] Japanese American Citizens League, "JACL Urges Caution in Aftermath of Terrorist Attack," *JACL.org* (press release), September 12, 2001, https://jacl.org/s/9_11-Press-Release.docx.

[31] Ibid.

[32] See Susan H. Kamei, "How memories of Japanese American imprisonment during WWII guided the US response to 9/11," *USC Dornsife News*, September 3, 2021, https://dornsife.usc.edu/news/stories/japanese-american-imprisonment-us-response-to-9-11/; and Chris Fuchs, "Norman Mineta's American story helped the U.S. apologize for incarceration and lead after 9/11," *NBC News*, March 14, 2019, https://www.nbcnews.com/news/asian-america/norman-mineta-s-american-story-helped-u-s-apologize-incarceration-n1005406.

simultaneously fully human and God within and outside of time and space. In this sense, Christ exists in the margins of both divinity and humanity.

Initially, one might contest the characterization of Christ's divine existence as being marginalized. If Christ is fully God, then no part of his divine existence should be diminished. On the contrary, we see a life of marginal existence in Christ's self-revelation. Moreover, his life is a self-marginalization in that the Son humbles himself even to the point of death on the cross (Phil 2:6). He is marginalized in his self-giving and self-denying, as he did not use his divine nature to his advantage but made himself the lowliest of all. So, in this sense, Christ's marginalization is self-determined by kenotically entering into liminality.

Jesus also lived on the margins of human existence through his self-determination to identify as a Galilean Jew. According to Lee, God choosing to take human form in the specific locale of Galilee had strategic value because "Galileans were in a more explicit way liminal in the religious, political, sociocultural, and economic aspects of their lives."[33] For one, Galilee's distance from Jerusalem, the center of the Jewish establishment, gave rise to their regional idiosyncrasies in their religious practices.[34] Galilee's cultural distance from Jerusalem further gave the impression of being a backwater region. For instance, John's Gospel records Nathanael deriding Jesus's qualifications because of his provenance from Nazareth, a small Galilean town.[35]

Jesus is further liminalized in his life and ministry, even among the Galileans, in his decision to leave his hometown of Nazareth to fulfill his mission. The account of Jesus's return home demonstrates the attitudes of its residents. Matthew writes in his Gospel, "Coming to his hometown, he [Jesus] began teaching the people in their synagogue, … and they took offense at him" (Matt 13:53-57).[36] Luke paints an even direr picture: "All the people in the synagogue were furious when they heard this [Jesus's reading of Isaiah 61]. They got up, drove him out of the town, and took him the brow of the hill on which the town was built, in order to throw him off the cliff" (Luke 4:28-29). To this, Jesus responds, "Prophets are not without honor, except in their hometown, and among their own kin, and in their own house" (Mark 6:4). According to Lee, leaving his hometown meant that Jesus willingly stepped into subjective liminality, thereby fully embracing his marginal status.[37] In other words, Jesus entered into liminality with purpose.

Jesus carries out his mission to humanity within these multiple layers of liminality. Here, Jesus embodies the threefold aspects of liminality. He paves a new way to the Father that did not rely on ancient Jewish religious practices or traditions, thereby fulfilling the messianic promise of Isaiah 43: "See, I am doing a new thing! … I am making a way in the wilderness and streams in the wasteland" (43:19). In doing so, Jesus creates a new relational orientation to the Father. Jesus also prophetically revisions the notion of God's kingdom people. Lee writes, "Jesus' prophetic criticism of, and resistance to, the oppressive powers were meant to serve to heal and restore as well as build human community, particularly his new community as an initial realization of God's

[33] Lee, *From a Liminal Place*, 60.

[34] E. W. G. Masterman, "Galilee in the Time of Christ," *The Biblical World* 32, no. 6 (1908): 406–7.

[35] See Rainer Riesner, "Galilee," in *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 1992).

[36] Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture citations come from the New Revised Standard Version.

[37] Lee, *From a Liminal Place*, 64-65. Lee differentiates between objective liminality, that is, having limited awareness of their *de facto* status, and subjective liminality, that is, having full awareness and ownership of the status: "Galileans were objectively liminal but they were not necessarily personally aware of the liminality of their social location. For a Galilean to be personally and thus self-consciously liminal, he or she had to appropriate it, that is, make it his or her own self-conscious reality" (64). See, also, John P. Meier, *A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus*, vol. 1 (New York: Doubleday, 1991).

reign."[38] In other words, Jesus's mission and ministry arguably could not have taken place had he not entered into liminal existence on his own accord.

Liminality of the Early Church

The liminality of the Son continues in the life of the local church as the body and community of Christ. The church is Christ's presence on earth as he bestows onto it "all authority in heaven and on earth" to "make disciples of all nations" (Matt 28:18-19). What resulted from Christ's Great Commission was an authentic community of believers who existed liminally on multiple levels, living in the moment in anticipation of the future and participating in the world as citizens of another kingdom. Thus, the essence of the early church was defined by a liminal existence.

Sue Russell describes the liminal nature of the early church from the first disciples to the pre-Constantinian communities. According to her, Luke's vision of the church in the Book of Acts was of a liminal community—one "experiencing the blessings of the restoration of Israel through the resurrected messiah" while at the same time "awaiting a future consummation of these promises."[39] Christians often encountered opposition from established authority structures. This experience of the early church lends itself to Paul's inaugurated eschatology of "living betwixt and between the ages."[40] The early church also lived liminally in society during the period, which Russell calls post-Pauline and pre-Constantinian, as it transitioned from being a marginal and persecuted sect of Judaism to a state-sponsored religion.

The church's liminal existence ended with the incorporation of its leadership into official and influential government positions. In doing so, "The Christian community in essence became part of the imperial governing body" and moved from anti-structure to structure.[41] In other words, Christians moved from the periphery to the center, and the church has since occupied this position in the Western world. This, however, was not the church as it was meant to be. Russell concludes her study by stating,

> The essence of ancient Christianity was relationships. For the early followers of Jesus, … it meant entering into a new community that sought to follow Jesus' teaching about a new way of living and relating to others. Although made up of people of different statuses (e.g., economic, ethnic, sex), they treated each other as equals. … Christ followers related to each other as if these statuses did not matter. It was a community in which people set aside concerns for self for concerns of the "other." There were no boundaries for the "other." They could be a fellow Christian, a neighbor, or even an enemy. For the early followers of Jesus extending love and concern, the "other" had become the "we."[42]

Notice Russell's description of the *communitas* taking place in the early church. Regardless of status or title, individuals shared a communion of relationality borne out of their shared liminal

[38] Lee, *From a Liminal Place*, 76–77.

[39] A. Sue Russell, *In the World but Not of the World: The Liminal Life of Pre-Constantine Christian Communities* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2019), 98.

[40] Russell, *In the World*, 136.

[41] Russell, *In the World*, 230.

[42] Russell, *In the World*, 231.

existence as Christians. Through this liminality, the early church fulfilled Christ's commission to make disciples.

Liminality and the Asian American Church

Liminality is the normative *locus operandi* of the *missio Dei*. In his mission, Jesus willfully entered into liminality and thereby established the paradigm for understanding the mission of the church. Mission is an extension of the relations within the Trinity by including humanity in God's inner communion. For human beings, then, mission entails participation in that community. So, in order to understand the mission of the church, we must keep in view the central position the notion of *communitas* occupies as the aim of mission. For "if *communitas* is the result, then liminality is the catalyzing condition that produces the result."[43] Therefore, we must take seriously the role of liminality in giving shape to this missional communion.

If the church is to fulfill its role in God's mission, then rather than viewing liminality as a temporary or transitional period, we must understand this in-between space as normative for the life of the church in the present age.[44] As the people of Christ's presence on earth, the church lives in the dialectical tension of the already and not yet. To be liminal means to live in the world but not of the world. Liminality proves integral to the church because it is integral to Christ's incarnational mission of presence. Just as Christ willingly stepped into liminality to carry out the Father's will, so must the church willingly enter the in-between spaces of society, away from the centers of power and into the peripheries. For "the church's marginality … is one of the most potentially powerful and redemptive elements" in the church's witness to the world, and out of liminality, "what will emerge is a fresh reconfiguration of the people's relationship to God and, therefore, to the surrounding culture."[45] In other words, the church's embrace of liminality as a normative state is vital for living into its mission.

Liminality serves as the *locus operandi* for mission and hopefully leads to a reconciled community. Lee draws this direct line: "Reconciliation is a restoration of human relationship, and liminality is the condition out of which communion between human beings emerges. Liminality, therefore, can lead to reconciliation."[46] However, this progression is not automatic and should not be assumed. Positioned between the realities of liminality and reconciliation is the mediatory mission of Jesus. From the space of liminality, Jesus reconciles relationships between God and humans as well as among humans as they incorporate into his body, made possible through the multiple liminal spaces he occupies. In short, liminality is the condition under which the *missio Dei* occurs.

The Asian American ecclesial experience of liminality and *communitas* offers much to the church at large because it informs one's understanding of the mission of God and provides new insights and opportunities moving forward in developing a more robust missional ecclesiology. It does so by reorienting itself toward a missional identity as pilgrims and sojourners in a foreign world and establishing the church's role as the mediator between multiple worlds.

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[43] Alan Hirsch, *The Forgotten Ways: Reactivating Apostolic Movements*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos, 2016), 163.

[44] Cf. Hirsch, *Forgotten Ways*, 165–67.

[45] Roxburgh, *Missionary Congregation*, 31–32.

[46] Lee, *From a Liminal Place*, 164. Cf. Christoph Schwöbel, "Reconciliation: From Biblical Observations to Dogmatic Reconstructions," in *The Theology of Reconciliation*, ed. Colin E. Gunton (London: T&T Clark, 2003), 22: "Reconciliation in Paul … is a relational metaphor. It depicts the transition from a broken relationship to a restored relationship."

Reorientation to a Pilgrim Identity

The perception of Asians in the United States as perpetual foreigners continues to have detrimental consequences for the Asian community. However, for the church, peculiarity is its natural state of existence. Jesus's prayer in John 17 describes his disciples as sent into the world while at the same time not being of the world (17:14-18), and 1 Peter describes the church as *sojourners* and *pilgrims* (1 Pet 2:11, ASV). This quality has characterized God's chosen people from the beginning, starting with Abraham. The author of Hebrews describes Abraham as an outsider: "By faith Abraham … made his home in the promised land like a stranger in a foreign country" (Heb 11:8-9, NIV). Moses lived most of his life as a desert wanderer, and the Jews lived in exile as foreigners in Assyria, Babylon, and beyond. In short, the history of God's people is one of liminal existence.

As a people of God sent into the world by the Son, the whole church must embrace liminality as the normative posture toward the world because Jesus embodied liminality in his own mission. In this sense, the local church, as a missional community, is also a pilgrim community. Martin Robinson draws this connection by stating, "The calling out [of the church] is that which makes us homeless and defines our new life of faith as a perpetual journey or wandering. The life of faith begins with an invitation to participate in the Missio Dei. It is necessarily a journey or a pilgrimage."[47] God's call to "go" necessarily requires disrupting the status quo. It requires a movement from the stability of structure to a liminal posture of anti-structure. This pilgrim identity characterizes the Asian American Church as Lee contends that the Asian American Church is "called to be a pilgrim people … 'to go out' with visions for 'a better country' that could be a true homeland, not only for ourselves, but for all humankind."[48] Pilgrim identity applies to the whole people of God and not just to those who find themselves in marginalized positions. It calls the whole church to "deny themselves and take up their cross" (Matt 16:24).

Mediation of Multiple Identities

The Asian American Church is poised to exemplify missional existence because of its liminality and the resulting *communitas*. By standing in multiple spaces, the Asian American Church has the potential to offer new and creative solutions to situations that would reduce possibilities to seemingly either-or binaries. Asian Americans experience multiple layers of liminality. The first layer is the hyphenated space between "Asian" and "American." Asian Americans find themselves caught between two (or more) cultural identities, resulting in what has been coined as a "third-culture kid" (TCK). Third culture is a concept first developed by American sociologists Ruth and John Useem to describe the experiences of children who grew up in two differing cultures: the culture of their parents and the culture of their childhood or adolescence. The experiences of these third-culture kids are carried throughout adulthood and provide a nuanced interpretive worldview. Patricia Stokke states, "TCKs have a propensity to develop a global mindset, which encompasses an acceptance and valuing of difference and an interest in diverse

[47] Martin Robinson, "Pilgrimage and Mission," in *Explorations in a Christian Theology of Pilgrimage*, ed. Craig Bartholomew and Fred Hughes (Surrey: Ashgate, 2004), 174.

[48] Lee, "Called to Be Pilgrims," 39.

others and environments."[49] This worldview opens the possibilities of mediating relationships between differing groups. According to John Useem,

> The third culture … consists of more than the mere accommodation or fusion of two separate, juxtaposed cultures, … they incorporate into their common social life a mutually acknowledged set of shared expectations. A third culture cannot be understood fully without reference to its mediating functions between societies nor apart from the cultures of the several societies in which its participants learned how to behave as human beings.[50]

In other words, third-culture individuals have the potential to mediate multiple worlds of culture.

Additionally, Asian Americans experience a layer of racial liminality. While the concept may seem like an artificial construct, race is a reality that impacts how we interact with our neighbors and the world around us. Thus, we must consider the dynamics of race in society, especially within marginalized groups. Furthermore, we must consider race as different from culture, for one's experience with culture cannot be equated with race.

In the United States, Asian Americans are caught in a polarized discussion about race. In a country where the dominant narrative of race relations is between black and white communities, Asian and Asian American communities are, at best, marginally included in the conversation, completely ignored, or—at worst—often forced to choose between the two poles. They exist somewhere in the middle, racialized as "yellow," which, according to Uriah Yong-Hwan Kim, translates as being "in opposition to white but also as different from black."[51] This liminal existence poses some unique challenges for Asian Americans, not just in how others perceive them but also in how they perceive themselves. On the one hand, Asian Americans have opportunities and privileges unafforded to blacks—they did not experience racial trauma to the same degree that black bodies have—so they are seen as not having shared the same degrees of racism that other minority communities have faced. This tension leads to the problem of Asian Americans minimizing their own particular experience of racism. Even the model-minority stereotype "ignores the white racism that Asian Americans continue to face."[52] On the other hand, Asian Americans are viewed as perpetual "sojourners and strangers,"[53] even those whose families have been in the United States for three or more generations.

In contrast, whites who have only recently immigrated to the United States immediately receive a degree of privilege. This liminal reality for Asian Americans has been made all too clear during the COVID-19 pandemic, where having an Asian face was an open invitation for whites and blacks alike to perpetrate verbal and physical acts of violence. Such traumatic events have

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[49] Patricia Stokke, "Third Culture Kids, Intercultural Competency, and Racial Justice," *Interact* 15, no. 1 (April 2021): 46.

[50] John Useem, "The Community of Man: A Study in the Third Culture," *Centennial Review* 7, no. 4 (1963): 484.

[51] Uriah Yong-Hwan Kim, "The *Realpolitik* of Liminality in Josiah's Kingdom and Asian America," in *Ways of Being, Ways of Reading: Asian American Biblical Interpretation*, ed. Mary F. Foskett and Jeffrey Kah-Jin Kuan (St. Louis: Chalice, 2006), 90. Also, see Gary Y. Okihiro, *Margins and Mainstreams: Asians in American History and Culture* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1994): "Asians have been marginalized to the periphery of race relations in America because of its conceptualization as a black and white issue. … Thus, to many, Asians are either 'just like blacks' or 'almost whites'" (xi).

[52] Kim, "*Realpolitik* of Liminality," 91.

[53] Okihiro, *Margins and Mainstreams*, xi.

ranged from verbal assaults berating Asians, regardless of ethnic origins, to "go back to China!"[54] to physical assaults against the elderly population—even in San Francisco, which consistently falls as one of the top ten cities with the highest population percentage of Asians. In some instances, hate crimes against the AAPI community jumped 567 percent from 2020 to 2021.[55]

Asian Americans stand between two spaces, belonging neither to one nor the other and, at the same time, resonating with both. While this poses certain challenges, it also opens up opportunities for reconciled relationships through mediation. In the same way that cultural liminality can mediate cultures, racial liminality has the potential to mediate race relations. However, one cannot assume this but must make such efforts intentional. The field of conflict resolution defines mediation as "nonadjudicatory dispute resolution processes that involve intervention by a party not involved in the dispute."[56] This term describes a movement from alienated to reconciled relationships via an intermediary. This proves significant toward understanding the purpose of Christ's incarnation and the church's presence in the world because he has reconciled us to God through his mission of mediation. What is more, this mediatory mission occurs in the context of liminality. Contrary to oversimplified imageries of the mediation process, the go-betweens do not stand at a distance in dispassionate neutrality but take on the full brunt of the conflict from both ends. David Augsburger states, "Mediation is … also the capacity to absorb tension, to suffer misunderstanding, to accept rejection, and to bear the pain of others' estrangement."[57] Jesus Christ exemplifies this mediatory position as he takes on both the suffering of crucifixion (from the point of humanity) and forsakenness (from the point of God) to reconcile humanity to God, all within the context of liminality. In other words, liminality serves as a necessary condition for mediatory reconciliation.

Conclusion

Indeed, Asian Americans occupy multiple liminal spaces. They are culturally and racially liminal. This exospheric description only draws a broad outline of the Asian American experience and does not account for the nuances of being, for example, an Asian American woman, LGBTQ+, adoptee, *hapa*, or any other qualifier that may lead to the experience of liminality. However, it does serve as a starting point for developing a framework for an Asian American theology of mission.

Asian Americans have made remarkable progress in assuming influential Christian leadership roles. Nonetheless, the Asian American Church has operated and continues to operate under the constraints of imposed liminality. However, one should perceive this as something other than a disadvantage. Liminality adds a necessary perspective for the church to fulfill its call toward mission. Since Constantine, the church and its mission have been culturally captive to the power

[54] "Reports of Anti-Asian Assaults, Harassment and Hate Crimes Rise as Coronavirus Spreads," *Anti-Defamation League*, June 18, 2020, https://www.adl.org/resources/blog/reports-anti-asian-assaults-harassment-and-hate-crimes-rise-coronavirus-spreads?psafe_param=1&gclid=CjwKCAjwpuajBhBpEiwA_ZtfhbBSx0HPS02u6o.

[55] San Francisco Police Department Media Relations Unit, *SFPD Victim Data: 2021 Preliminary Hate Crime Statistics in San Francisco*, January 24, 2022, https://acrobat.adobe.com/link/track?uri=urn%3Aaaid%3Ascds%3AUS%3Ab4b90cdb-ffb2-4b7c-90eb-55b18eebfcc7&viewer%21megaVerb=group-discover.

[56] "Mediation," in *Dictionary of Conflict Resolution*, ed. Douglas H. Yarn (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1999), 272.

[57] David W. Augsburger, *Conflict Mediation Across Cultures: Pathways and Patterns* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1992), 191.

dynamics entrenched in Christendom's culture. The normative liminality that characterized the early Christian community gave way to the consolidation of power under the hegemonic church-state, and the kingdom of God was not proclaimed by the witness of the *communitas* but by the power of the sword. In this sense, mission lost its essential meaning in Christendom. A return to liminality recovers the true essence of the church's mission.

Liminality can be formally described as a transitional space and a momentary state of existence. However, liminality is the normative state of being for the church as it extends Christ's mission of mediating the relationship between God and humanity through its witness. The Asian American ecclesial experience provides a necessary corrective to the Western majority church experiencing marginalization by showing them that the marginalized church can survive and thrive in the face of marginalization. The instinct against losing power or influence is to regain it. Nevertheless, Christ's model of liminality shows that God has called the church to willingly renounce the centers of power and take up the unsettled position of being betwixt and between multiple realities as it exists in the world but not of the world. For in the liminal spaces, the church ultimately realizes the *missio Dei*.