

***Biblia/Ang Banal Na Kasulatan: Towards a Filipino Functional Approach
to Inspiration of the Holy Scriptures***

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INTRODUCTION

In 1984, evangelical scholars in Asia advanced a position on “bibliology,” one that was consistent with the orthodox faith as articulated in the West. The declaration was made in view of the task of contextualization. They agreed, “The Bible is a historical document, inspired, infallible, and inerrant.” To safeguard pure subjective interpretation, theologians indorsed the grammatico-historical approach to the biblical text, which was adopted by Filipino evangelicals by default. Mainline denominations still anchor their statements on the Holy Scriptures in Western historical roots.

To say that a particular indigenous, Filipino evangelical “bibliology” exists is a misnomer. Filipinos Protestants assume and affirm that Scriptures as the basis for faith and practice. The issue for Protestant and evangelicals is hermeneutics.

One thing that was mentioned by the committee was to translate what will be said in this essay into my “native” language. I ask myself, “which one?” I spent my first five years in Iloilo where Hiligaynon is the “native” language. Then my family moved to Malaybalay, Bukidnon where most of the people spoke Cebuano. But our immediate environment consisted of Ilocano, Ilonggo, Tagalog and the natives of the area. From there, we move to a place where Bisaya is the “national” language.¹ And now I am using Pilipino (Tagalog) or Bisaya-Pilipino!

In this paper, I will attempt to explicate certain realities regarding the Filipino’s view of the Scripture not simply from a “purely armchair” theological position but from

¹Cebuanos (the People) in Cebu City insists even today that Bisaya should be the national language. This is one reason the Philippine National Anthem was translated into their “native” tongue.

existential realities. It is necessary that theological discussions must be informed by the context of the recipients to be faithful to the Lord's mandate of making disciples of all nations. Any theological "statements" should be soteriological and *matheytical*² – two components of missional theology(ies), among others. To do that, I will briefly assess Article IV of the *Manual*, followed by a re-reading of the same, and then propose some implications for ongoing tasks of doing theology in the Philippines. The footnoting is scarce but bibliography is provided.

I. "Holy Scriptures" in the *Manual*: An Assessment

We believe in the plenary inspiration of the Holy Scriptures, by which we understand the 66 books of the Old and New Testaments, given by divine inspiration, inerrantly revealing the will of God concerning us in all things necessary to salvation, so that whatever is not contained therein is not to be enjoined as an article of faith.

The present article in the *Manual* of the Church of the Nazarene is succinct and open-ended. It provides clues in doing a "bibliology." The clues, however, are somewhat concealed in form. The article emphasizes the Protestant canon as being inspired in its "totality." The term *plenary* can be understood in a number of ways. It has been viewed as referring to "the whole and every part" being divinely inspired, the message in particular.³ It can also refer to the "material" and the content of the Scriptures. While theologians assert the immaterial dimension of the inspiration of the Scriptures, for Filipinos it includes the "material." To say "total" is to include everything, e.g., material and content(s), because the Bible is also a religious book. So then, Filipinos need to comprehend plenary as term, idea, or concept.

²The word is derived from Greek word *maththas* meaning disciple.

³H. Orton Wiley, *Christian Theology*, vol 1 (Kansas City, MO: Beacon Hill Press, 1940), 184; Westlake Purkiser, Richard S. Taylor, Willard H. Taylor, *God, Man, and Salvation* (Kansas City, MO: Beacon Hill Press of Kansas City, 1978), 204;

The Article also affirms that by divine inspiration the sixty-six books are inerrant in their revelation of God's will for human salvation. This means the doctrine of divine inspiration is subsidiary to the doctrine of divine disclosure. Revelation, then, stands as the foundation of inspiration. The goal of revelation is human salvation because God's will "unto salvation" is the central message of the Scriptures, and that message is embodied in the person, life, and ministry of Jesus Christ. In essence, the word of God (written revelation) is about The Logos of God, Jesus Christ.

The last phrase of the article qualifies the limit, in the phrase, "so that whatever is not contained therein is not to be enjoined as an article of faith." This is to say that the Holy Scriptures is unquestionably the sufficient source of God's will unto salvation, and that other sources in addition to Scripture are not to be considered authoritative even for an Article of faith, Creeds, or Confession. Thus, such phrase indicates the freedom about the use of the Scriptures. The phrase provides an avenue wherein God's freedom is allowed to express through the Holy Scriptures in ways consistent with God's will. Moreover, the clause also opens up possibilities of hermeneutical approaches necessitated by further growth in the knowledge of the mysteries of Christ.

II. A Re-reading of Article IV

There are two major stages of God's direct revelation with humankind in relation to the "use" of the Holy Scriptures: the Holy Scriptures for "power encounter" and the Holy Scriptures for edification.

A. Holy Scriptures for Power Encounter

I read Article IV with an understanding of God's freedom and God's pre-saving, redemptive work. God's freedom involves His use of time and space, and

method in drawing people to himself. The doctrine of prevenient grace expands the human limits, that is, God is free to bring the divine into strategic positions of encounter with the created, finite human beings. Such reachable distance is initiated by God to aid humankind to embrace the divine. In general, the Filipinos can have access to the Holy Scriptures because it is “available.”

The Filipino, especially the animists, holds to a certain degree that the Bible can serve as amulet or even a lucky charm simply because of its designation as the “Bible.” *Biblia*, in Tagalog and other dialects, describes the Holy Scriptures as material; it is a book with cover and pages, sacred in and of itself because it is a religious book. That makes the *Biblia* the “Holy Scriptures,” the *Banal na Kasulatan*. Again, the Filipino animist’s understanding of the Scripture is “elevated” into a higher stage. *Biblia* becomes “holy,” *banal* (sacred) denoting an idea of the material “animating” in substance that assume innate powers. The physical *Biblia* becomes “holy,” not in ethical, but in animistic sense. The material *Biblia* has power, which animates itself mostly during “power encounters.” God is understood to be behind this “enlivening.”

Many Filipino Christian workers and laity hold the view that God still uses the physical-material, *Biblia*. In many instances, pre-evangelistic waves are characterized by “driving out the evil spirit” from a *tao* (person) by means of putting the “Biblia” on chests or foreheads. The gesture implies that the *Biblia* is not just a material book but is also “sacred,” powerful all throughout. “Power encounter” is understood as a direct encounter between the evil spirit literally within the person and the “sacred” *Biblia* “without.”

About two years ago, Filipino evangelical leaders held an interdenominational consultation near APNTS. I was an observer. The topic was about signs and wonders, and the Word. Various denominational representatives and leaders presented papers. Afterwards, the facilitator remarked that now the non-Pentecostals and those of non-Charismatic movement recognize the necessity of “power encounters” in God’s redemptive plan. Before, a clear dividing theological and “practical” wall stood strong between the two “camps.” Now, there is across-the-board ecclesiastical acknowledgement that “power encounter” sessions are important signs that the Kingdom of God is breaking forth into a community, signs that souls in that community are ready to be harvested for the Kingdom. The “breaking in” of the kingdom is brought about by the power of the “Biblia,” which is “holy.” This is to say, *theopneustos* extends to the very material of the *Biblia*. The inspiration of the “material” contains the redemptive works of God in human history. The Holy Scriptures’ purpose at this stage is to reveal the spiritual victory against a god (of the animists) or spirits by the true Spirit of God, and the ultimate power of God against any gods or spirits combined. In the past, God used various modes of disclosing His redemptive will, e.g., religious artifacts items. *Biblia* functions in similar a manner. While it is not the end in itself, it is nonetheless serving the redemptive intentions of God.

B. The Holy Scriptures for Edification

This category is “cracking the obvious.” The Holy Scriptures as indispensable for Christian discipleship is both personal and communal. Filipino sometimes asserts the authority of the Holy Scriptures in the following phrases, “The Bible says...” or “The Word of God says” or “God says.” The intention behind the usage of these phrases also varies.

“All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting, and training in righteousness” (NIV, 2 Timothy 3:16), writes the Apostle Paul, expressing the necessity of the Scriptures in discipleship. While the passage is normally interpreted as alluding to the TANAK, it has become the classic text used theologically to refer to the Holy Scriptures. The Scripture is declared “useful” or “profitable,” terms that denote positive results in “righteousness.” A Filipino looks at this from a pragmatic perspective. One can think and say that “righteousness” is more important than a doctrine of inspiration. In other words, for a Filipino, the “use” of Holy Scriptures should be stressed equally with the doctrine of inspiration.

In looking at the passage above, Lorenzo Bautista observes that “teaching, rebuking, correcting, and training” are all set in the context of a community.⁴ “In righteousness” presupposes that the “trainee,” the disciple, is already in a personal relationship with God, but one needs to know the different “uses” of the Holy Scriptures. The reason for the Scripture’s usefulness is indicated by Paul, e.i., a thorough equipping for good works. Thus, the passage stresses the *matheytical* function of the Scriptures within the context of a community.

Another classic passage in Article IV is 2 Peter 1:20-21. It states, “Above all, you must understand that no prophecy of Scripture came about by the prophet’s own interpretation. For prophecy never had its origin in the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit.” Theology reads “prophecy” not as foretelling but forthtelling, and is referred to the Holy Scriptures. This passage, along with 2 Timothy 3:16, does not indicate explicitly the method of inspiration. Because both

⁴Lorenzo Bautista, “The Bible: Servant in the Formation of Communities of Faith” in *Doing Theology in the Philippines* (Quezon City, Philippines: Asian Theological Seminary, 2005), 56.

passages are open-ended, a Filipino may adopt various theories of inspiration without necessarily knowing the theological categories. Some Filipinos embrace the doctrine of complete inerrancy, others limited inerrancy, and the rest inerrancy of purpose. Does this negate the necessity of holding a “theology of the Scriptures?”

The *Manual* is clear that the Holy Scriptures is inerrant concerning God’s redemptive will. Several things can be noted. First, it indicates that God the Holy Spirit is the author of the Holy Scriptures. Second, on the identity of the Bible, the Word of God is unique because it bears witness to the redemptive work of God in Jesus Christ. Third, the Scripture may be understood not only as the revelatory Word of God incarnate but also as the participatory Word of God written. Hence, the Scripture has the capacity to mediate the very Presence of God—“a mediated immediacy” of the divine presence.

The foregoing assertions manifest significant considerations on the study of divine inspiration of the Holy Scriptures within the context of the community of faith. Even with open-ended theological possibilities, a theological position from a Filipino perspective is in order. Wesleyan theological system begins and ends with God. The Trinitarian God is the source, agent and sustainer of revelation. Because of that, a theological position on inspiration is crucial to preservation of the written revelation. Inspiration serves to preserve the authority, value, intent, and power of God’s written revelation. This is important because that what God revealed to the immediate recipients of the Holy Scriptures continues to be true to the contemporary Filipino. What is true regarding the central message of the revelation is Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ, revealed in the Scripture, is the message Filipinos need to hear and keep hearing. The point of reference for appropriating the authority of the Bible and for interpreting its contents is

the definitive self-revelation of God in the history, person, life, and ministries of Jesus Christ.

III. Implications to the Ongoing Tasks of Doing Theology in the Philippines

Embedded in the foregoing discussion is the doctrine of prevenient grace. God's grace is in all and for all. God's grace at work is not bound by interpretation. For a Filipino, this grace is the *Biblia*, the *Banal na Kasulatan*. With the assertion that Philippines is the only Christian nation in Asia, it may be worthwhile to affirm that to some degree. One reason is the availability and accessibility of the Filipino people with the Scripture. As a religious book, the Bible is accepted generally, and animosity to some. The animosity by others is due to the denominational or "Christian" association, e.g., the Protestant or Christian is known by possessing a copy of the *Biblia*. An example of this is appropriate. Not long ago, we went to see an orthopedic doctor. After a while in his office, I notice a copy of the Bible. I asked, "what Church do you attend?" He answered back with a question, "Why?" "Because I see a copy of the Bible on the shelf," was my response. He said, "I am a Roman Catholic." And I said, "That's great that you have a Bible here." He smiled and said, "that's placed there by the Gideons." The next time we came back he was much friendlier and very accommodating. What, then, can we further infer?

1. Affirm and appreciate the religiosity of the Filipino people. While it is easy to see their camouflages on pain, struggles, and uncertainties, their polytheistic characteristics and animistic framework, the *Biblia* may be used by God's prevenient grace. If indeed the *Holy Scriptures* bears good news, it must be freed from denominational clutters. Wesleyan's doctrine of preventing grace is likewise manifested in Filipino's religious

nature. 2. It may well be appropriate for Filipinos to be informed, or to know that God is in the process of redeeming them, even if God is not acknowledged in a manner that a Christian define it. Sometimes, a Filipino is like an Ethiopian eunuch. He or she may read the Scripture as a piece of literature. Even with the “secular” purposes of studying the Scriptures, God may reveal Himself to that reader in His time. This is true with Dr. Wilfredo Manaois, a retired APNTS Filipino professor. 3. It is worthwhile to stress to a Filipino the “positives” of the Christian faith, e.g., the Wesleyan message of God’s love. The *Banal na Kasulatan* contains the message of God’s love in the person of Christ. The *Shema* is the summary of the TANAK as Jesus declared. Likewise, the Holy Scriptures as a whole is the “Shema” for the Filipinos of today. This is to say, then, that the Scripture is the primary and authentic witness to the revelation of God for the salvation and wholeness of all humanity, hence, God’s love.

In the context of a community – the Christian community, the Scripture remains the sole authority for faith, and guide for practice. The “basis” for faith and practice is God’s love. Thus, *Banal na Kasulatan* is adequate in teaching persons to grow and live together based on Christ’s love. The Greatest Commandment Jesus pronounced in the three Gospels is the “whole and partial” of the Holy Scriptures. Jesus embodied and lived this in the context of the greater community, e.g., the “world” of his day. Jesus commanded his disciples “to love another. By this all men may know that you are my disciples.” This “evangelistic” love is significant to the drawing near of all people to Jesus Himself, the center of God’s revelation. The “usefulness” of the Holy Scriptures is set in the Christian community.

Finally, as indicated in Article IV, hermeneutics should continually be allowed to

expresses the multi-faceted, the “diamondic” nature of the Scriptures. The beauty of the diamond is not confined to one angle. The various angles give the stone an overall magnificent beauty. Article IV continues to open possibilities of diverse modes of interpretation. John Wesley is a critical eclectic with a unifying theological center.

In the Philippines, there is a growing awareness of the manifold modes of understanding, interpreting and applying biblical truths. With an animistic background and tradition, the Filipino is also pluralistic in nature. Hence, interfaith dialogues via “hermeneutics” must be allowed as a means to a greater goal. In interfaith dialogues, the Holy Scriptures with its accompanying theological “safeguards” functions as “seeds of God.” An analogy is proper at this point. A farmer scattered seeds. Some seeds grow, others may not. Nonetheless, the act of sowing is done in faith that every seed will grow, and the farmer is hindered by knowledge that other seeds may not grow and bring forth a harvest. The kingdom of God will inevitably grow. It is “us” the theologians who presupposes theological categories regarding Holy Scriptures, yet God remains free to use however he intends. It is God who causes the seed to grow. This fact does not remove responsibility. Rather, reminds humility.

Conclusion:

The Holy Scriptures is God’s. God’s servants are stewards of the God’s revelation. God revealed so that He may be known as well as His ways, His redemptive plan. Hermeneutics of Filipino culture is necessary in the process of “telling” God’s revelation. What has been proposed is a functional approach in developing a doctrine of the Holy Scriptures to the Filipino. To the Filipino unbeliever, the Holy Scriptures is God’s and He is free to use the *Biblia* in ways consistent with redemptive will because it is *banal*..

The Holy Scriptures is likewise an indispensable divine “instrument” for growth within a Christian community. It is *Banal na Kasulatan* implying that God “ordained” the Holy Scriptures as adequate source for growth, personal and within the community. To the Filipino, these are relevant. Article IV of the *Manual* indirectly affirms these.

Purihin ang Diyos!

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