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*Book Review*

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**A Reformed Ecclesiology in Filipino American Perspective**

by Neal D. Presa

Author(s): Henry S. Kuo

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## **Ascension Theology and Habakkuk:**

*A Reformed Ecclesiology in Filipino American Perspective*

By: **Neal D. Presa**

*Publisher: Palgrave Macmillan (New York, New York, U.S.A.)*

*Year: 2018, Pages: xiii + 99 pp.*

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*Price: \$54.99*

*Reviewed by: Henry S. Kuo, Graduate Theological Union*

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Within Reformed theology, ecclesiology is lamentably one of the more understudied disciplines. One reason for this is because ecclesiology is often assumed: get Christology/pneumatology/biblical hermeneutics “right,” so it is thought, and ecclesiology will fall into place. But what this assumption fails to realize is that these disciplines contain a wide spectrum of legitimate diverse perspectives, and that the church is populated by people marred by sin. Hence, in practice ecclesiology rarely falls into place, but into pieces. The same is perhaps true in Asian American theology: among the most uninterrogated problems is the lack of diversity within Asian American theological voices. The hegemonic dominance of East Asian (namely, Chinese, Japanese, and Korean) perspectives obscures the inherent diversity within Asian America and, incidentally, contributes powerfully to the racializing myth of Asian Americans as the “model minority.” And then there is the minor prophet Habakkuk whose ministry and experiences appear rarely in the lectionary and is easily lost among other minor prophets. His experiences are, compared to other prophets, less utilized as a resource for theological reflection.

These understudied dimensions of Christian theology are refreshingly represented in Neal Presa’s Reformed ecclesiology. As a third-generation Filipino American, Presa is uniquely trained both as a theologian and liturgist, and is a seasoned pastor. He has taught at many theological institutions, pastored small and large multi-racial congregations, and even served as the 220<sup>th</sup> Moderator of the Presbyterian Church (USA). Few leaders in the Church are more intensely attuned to the importance of en-

voicing and re-membling the peoples from the Church's margins. The small size of the physical book hides the weight and depth of its contributions to Asian American and Reformed theologies.

Methodologically, Reformed ecclesiologies are typically approached in conversation with another theological doctrinal category, predominately Christology. And Presa follows this methodological frame, focusing in particular on Christ's ascension. Five chapters comprise this book. The first sets the stage by making the case for why a Filipino American contribution to the Reformed dialogue is important and the contextual shape of such a theological vision. Here, Presa makes an important argument by noting how contextualization is not merely a question of bringing the gospel to bear upon local particularities in resistance to Euro-centric universalizations of theology, but also diasporic uniquenesses in critique of pan-Asian generalizations of local theologies. For instance, he takes his cue from Gemma Tulud Cruz, who presciently raises important distinctions amid parallels between theologies of struggle in the Philippines and those of Filipina overseas workers in Hong Kong, thereby questioning universalizing approaches to Philippine theologies of struggle.

The second chapter introduces a theology of ascension, drawing on the voices of John Calvin, Karl Barth, and the Confession of 1967. In short, ascension theology asks what Christ's ascension means for the church today, to which Calvin and Barth have responded with their parallel assertions that to be church in a time of ascension is to recognize its life within history. To be sure, Calvin and Barth were not original in their assertions—both drew from St. Augustine's image of the church as *peregrinus* that lives in the limes of the *civitas terrena* as it laboriously journeys towards its final home in the *civitas Dei*. As such, hope is a critical virtue, for it is only in hope that the peregrine church can survive by the power of Christ amidst challenges to its existence and the gospel that it has been entrusted to proclaim. Presa helpfully makes the connection between theology and practice by showing how such hopeful living is demonstrated in *balaha na*, a willingness to live faithfully while being confident in God's sovereignty (19). This is not a call for apathy. The hope required for *balaha na* compels Christians towards meaningful praxis. Hence, Gemma Tulud Cruz can connect *balaha na* to *pakikibaka*, the hope-filled and risky struggle

to live as strangers in new lands. Thus, for Presa, to be church in light of Christ's ascension is *pakikibaka as balaha na* (21).

Chapters 3 and 4 expand the ascension theological framework into homiletics and biblical hermeneutics while continuing to interweave theological reflection with Filipino-American narratives. Chapter 3, focusing on homiletics, constitutes a theological analysis of Presa's own sermon series on Habakkuk. This is not the only part of the book that includes homiletical reflections—the book also includes three appendices that are sermons preached at a Presbyterian conference in Taiwan. But it shows how the ascension framework, applied homiletically to Habakkuk, uses context to bridge theology with praxis. The themes Presa draws from the prophet focus on communicating, waiting, and praise, which mesh interestingly with his ecclesiological theme of struggle. An ecclesiology of struggle—*pakikibaka*—is aimless without the hopeful risk of *balaha na*, and indeed, this liminal hope-filled struggle is what connects communities separated by the Pacific Ocean and, as he suggests, is what can also connect all Christians with Christ through the Spirit (36). The fourth chapter dips again into Habakkuk to flesh out a sacramental hermeneutic that, as he puts it, “sees the sacramentality of people, events, words, actions, and their locations and the dynamic interplay of all of it in a multivalent, multidimensional way” (41). This is, of course, easier described than actualized. After all, the multivalence and multidimensionality of such a hermeneutic is not easily visualized and hard to articulate, even more so in times of difficulty and turmoil. Here Presa draws the reader back to faith, hope, and love of the God who has not abandoned humanity. But this is also how Christianity works: living in the time of Christ's ascension, Christians place their faith in an invisible/revealed God, a God who works in unexpected places and through the margins of society—an experience that is reflected in the Filipino American Christian community.

Diarmaid MacCulloch has written about how, for John Calvin, catholicity would describe his ecclesiological project better than “Protestant.”<sup>1</sup> Catholicity in the Reformed imagination, however, is not merely a matter of doctrinal subscription or conformity with a certain

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<sup>1</sup> Diarmaid MacCulloch, *All Things Made New: The Reformation and Its Legacy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 55.

polity or practice. It reaches into our cultures and worldviews, critiquing them at times, but elevating them as well. In this book, Presa demonstrates how catholicity can be actualized in the church. He resources voices in Scripture and the Reformed theological tradition, placing them in critical conversation with his own ecumenical experiences and his own cultural practices and concepts. He accompanies his theological reflections with many instances and examples of catholicity being actualized in culture and in church. In so doing, Presa demonstrates its complex nature, one that takes seriously the heart of churchly and creaturely struggles in the world.

But this book is also a rich contribution to Asian American theologies. Presa rightly observes that Asian American homiletics is an understudied field, and responds by not only sharing his own sermons that seamlessly integrate Habakkuk's testimony with his own Filipino-American background and sermons that he preached in Taiwan. An ascension ecclesiology should inculcate generosity, and that opens its doors to the poor, the outcast, the stranger, and the other, recognizing that the church is less catholic—and therefore, less orthodox—without them (81). In weaving skillfully theology with homily, biblical story with personal testimony, Presa subtly calls out the importance of recognizing the diversity of Asian American theologies, and how such theologies are greatly diminished when its catholicity is reduced to those of East Asian voices.

This is an unjustly short review of a book that is weighty in content. It is a refreshing contribution to a variety of theological discourses and a rich book in which readers can be assured of an expanded knowledge of Reformed ecclesiology, Asian American theologies, and ascension theology. That it is a Palgrave Macmillan book costing significantly less than \$100 makes it a suitable purchase for pastors, church leaders, and seminarians, particularly those within the Asian American community.

*Henry S. Kuo is the managing editor of the Berkeley Journal of Religion and Theology. His research focuses on Reformed ecclesiology and ecumenical theology.*

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