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Competing Notions of Humility: Why Korean Americans Do Not Need to Abandon Confucius to Get to Christ

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Competing Notions of Humility: Why Korean Americans Do Not Need to Abandon Confucius to Get to Christ

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Abstract
Korean Americans often go to church not only for religious reasons, but also for social and cultural reasons. Due to the close tie between the Korean immigrant church and cultural traditions, second-generation Korean Americans often struggle with trying to balance Eastern and Western cultural values. In particular, tensions arise for second-generation Korean Americans between competing notions of humility. Such tensions, however, provide opportunities to reflect on the particular nature of Christian humility. This article presents biblical humility as one that is neither the maintenance of cultural traditions nor the personal growth of individual disciples; rather, Christ-shaped, Spirit-filled humility is the cultivation of right relationship with the creator God.

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Attending church is important in the Korean American community, not only for reasons that are religious and spiritual but also social and cultural. Sung Park (1997) states that Korean Christians go to church for four main reasons: fellowship, culture, social service, and social status. Likewise, Jung Oh (2004, p. 126) observes,

> For the first generation the church is both a place of social interaction and cultural identification. After all, they speak the same language and share the same values and customs; and much of their unique cultural behaviour is mutually reinforced in the social contacts provided by the church.

Second-generation Korean Americans, however, have a different relationship with the church. That is, in contrast to their parents, who attend the KM (Korean Ministry) and experience the church as a place where shared values and customs are reinforced, second-generation Korean Americans attend the EM (English Ministry) and often experience the church as a place where Eastern and Western values are in conflict. As Ken Fong notes,

> Even with a more American mindset, these Asian Americans often find themselves living at the intersection of two different worlds. In the world of larger American society, they know that they can move about more comfortably and garner wider acceptance due to their more westernized upbringing. In a church setting, there are many who would feel more at home in a white congregation than in an Asian one that was dominated by immigrant attitudes. Or they might feel equally uncomfortable in both. But being marginal ethnics, they still have ties to their ethnic roots, ties that they have no desire to sever. In fact, many of the core traditional values of their Asian culture continue to influence their decision. (1990, p. 46; cited in Rah, 2009, p. 183)

Navigating multiple worlds frequently results in frustration and inner conflict. Yet liminal spaces can be productive sites from which to interrogate the nature of our faith. One such area we wish to explore is the biblical virtue of humility. On the one hand, second-generation Korean

Americans learn early on, in church and in the home, that humility is necessary to maintain social order. On the other hand, their encounter with American individualism—the view of the majority culture—raises doubts about virtues that prioritize the collective over the individual. We argue that a biblical, Christ-shaped humility speaks to the cultural tensions that second-generation Korean American Christians navigate.

Western Perspectives on Humility

Although there is no universally accepted definition of humility in Western cultures, having low self-focus and being other-oriented are prominent themes. Dictionaries have typically defined humility as holding oneself in low regard, a trait of meekness, and self-abasement. Meagher et al. (2015), in their article published in the *Journal of Research in Personality*, composed a description of humility noting its multidimensional construct: humility most commonly includes "an accurate or moderate assessment of one's own abilities, being open to new ideas, having a low self-focus, and being able to acknowledge one's own mistakes" (Meagher et al., 2015, p. 36). Clinical Psychologist Elizabeth Krumrei-Mancuso (2017) noted that definitions of humility also include having low self-focus and being other-oriented.

In investigating personality lexicons of diverse languages and cultures, Ashton and Lee (2007) created a six-dimensional structure known as the HEXACO model of personality. The authors identified honesty-humility as a personality trait that

> represents the tendency to be fair and genuine in dealing with others, in the sense of cooperating with others even when one might exploit them without suffering retaliation… high levels of Honesty-Humility are associated with decreased opportunities for personal gains from the exploitation of others but also with decreased risks of losses from withdrawal of cooperation by others. (Ashton and Lee, 2007, p. 156)

Christian psychologists Peter Hill and Elizabeth Laney (2016) present humility as a hypo-egoic phenomenon that involves a nondefensive willingness to see oneself accurately by acknowledging one's personal limitations, combined with an appreciation for the strengths and contributions of other people from which one can learn. They also claim, based on Davis, Worthington, and Hook's (2010; 2011) model of relational humility, that "humility is not a trait that is practiced, or even developed, in isolation. Humility is inherently a relational concept, as its definition proposes an outward focus and some degree of prosocial orientation" (Hill

and Laney, 2016, p. 247). They also stated:

> [Humble people] tend to view themselves as being anchored within a larger community, leading to a sense of connectedness to others or to something outside of themselves. This low focus on themselves and corresponding sense of connectedness to something outside of them enables humble persons to transcend self-preoccupation and increase the potential for prosocial concern. (Hill and Laney, 2016, p. 244)

Depending on the scholar, then, Western perspectives on humility emphasize either the disposition of an individual (i.e., an individual trait) or the relation of individual to others (i.e., being other-oriented), or some permutation of the two. We affirm that there is value to each of these perspectives. Yet any account of humility that conceives of this virtue in terms of personal self-abasement, whether freely chosen or societally imposed, overlooks the most critical element of "biblical" humility: not merely the absence of pride or low self-regard, but the cultivation of right relationship with the creator God (cf. Macaskill 2018, 67).

Eastern Perspectives on Humility

East Asian societies have emphasized, and continue to emphasize, the virtue of humility more than most other societies (Herzberg and Herzberg, 2012, p. 24). Humility is seen in individuals, in their relationships with others, and in the very culture and language itself. For instance, after preparing a grand feast for a guest, it is common for the host to declare that there is nothing to eat. People are trained to speak little about their accomplishments lest others become embarrassed or lose face in comparison. Children are taught to be humble and are reprimanded for being braggadocious.

Herzberg and Herzberg (2012) argue that because Asian countries, especially China, were so densely populated, people of these cultures had to emphasize the good of the group over the individual (p. 24). If people did not choose to live in harmony, there would be great conflict due to just the lack of physical space. Hence, the physical environment itself prompted meekness and group coherence.

East Asian values are often identified as being synonymous with Confucian values (Shin and Silzer, 2016, p. 107). School-aged children are required to memorize sayings and proverbs that date back to the teachings of Confucius some 2,500 years ago. And Confucian teachings are responsible for regulating hierarchical structural distinctions and expectations for social behavior.

Confucius attributed the political disorder of his day to the lack of *li*, "propriety" or "proper conduct" (Shin and Silzer, 2016, p. 140). Shin and Silzer note,

> *Li* is not just appropriately performing a social role, but also knowing the appropriate behavior expected of one's role in various social contexts…Confucius proposed that *li* should be learned through the social interactions within five hierarchical relationships (ruler to subject, parent to child, husband to wife, older to younger, and friend to friend). (2016, p. 141)

The individual members of the body politic learn *li* by performing their assigned social roles, which in turn, ensures the social order. If an individual does not perform and internalize *li*, severe cultural and relational consequences may follow. These consequences may include not only being ostracized from the group, but also bringing shame and dishonor to one's family. (There are "113 prototypical terms for shame in the Chinese language, divided into six clusters of meaning" [Lau, 2020, p. 189].) Moreover, there is at least the potential, as Shin and Silzer (2016) note, for "Confucian values [to] contribute to a sense of duty without underlying positive motivation" (p. 150).

Second-generation Korean Americans wrestle with the notion of humility as "a sense of duty without underlying positive motivation." Yet the choice is not as simple as turning from one version of humility (Eastern) to another (Western), for what we encounter in much of Western Christianity, especially in forms of American evangelicalism, is an approach to humility that is radically individualistic. That is, when the virtue of humility is embedded within an evangelical tradition based on "accountable freewill individualism" (Emerson and Smith, 2000, p. 76), or "the gospel of personal sin management" (Edwards, 2020, p. 33), it becomes yet another metric by which Christians measure personal piety. The community remains necessary, to be sure, but only insofar as it provides the means for the individual self to grow: an "I" needs a "you" with which it may exercise and measure "my humility."

This notion of modern individualism, a characteristic of U.S. culture (and especially of white evangelicalism; see Emerson and Smith, 2000, p. 77), involves an entire way of seeing the world. As Grant Macaskill notes,

> When we speak, rather casually, of modern 'individualism,' we often deploy the term as if it simply denotes the pursuit of one's own interests at the expense of a community. In truth, however, the term

> points to an entire system of thinking about the individual self as if it were something that has an autonomous identity; the moral dimension of individualism is wrapped up with a deeper issue about how selves are conceived. (2018, p. 81)

Given the unraveling of the moral self in Western culture (see, e.g., MacInytre, 1988), immigrant Christian communities have every reason to resist the allure of "American individualism." (This is of course easier said than done, especially when the churches of the majority culture hold forth "individualism" as the clear and imperative "biblical worldview.")

In fact, the traditional values of East Asian societies share much in common with the biblical authors. For example, Te-Li Lau (2020) has shown that Confucius is much closer to Paul when it comes to the concepts of shame and propriety than most Americans are (pp. 188–203). Asian and Asian American Christians are correct to emphasize that Scripture imagines "communities that foster communitarianism and interdependence" (Lau, 2020, p. 200). The problem with Confucian humility, then, is not that Confucius prioritized the collective, or that *li* (propriety or proper conduct) tends to function as an extrinsic social pressure (both of these dynamics are readily apparent in the "humility" lexicon of the Bible.) The issue, rather, is that Scripture construes humility as Christ-shaped and Spirit-driven. That is, humility flows out of union with Christ by the energizing power of the Holy Spirit.

Christ-Shaped, Spirit-Filled Humility

Scripture is replete with summons to humility and lowliness. Jesus taught his disciples that "the poor in spirit" and "the meek" are heirs of the kingdom of heaven and of the renewed cosmos (Matt 5:3, 5), concepts he no doubt learned from studying the Torah, Prophets, and Psalms. Later in Matthew, he beckons the crowds, "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light" (Matt 11:28–29, NIV). The humble Messiah thus instructs his followers in his way of humility.

The New Testament is clear that the humble way of Jesus is the way of the God of Israel (cf. Mark 1:3). Paul makes this point explicit in the poem he presents to the holy ones in Philippi:

> Who, being in the form of God,
> did not consider equality with God
> something to be used to his

own advantage;
rather, he made himself nothing
by taking the form of a
slave,
being born in human likeness.
And being found in appearance as a
human,
he humbled himself
by becoming obedient unto death—
even death on a cross!
Therefore God exalted him to the
highest place
and gave him the name that is above
every name,
that at the name of Jesus every knee
should bow,
in heaven and on earth an under
the earth,
and every tongue acknowledge that
Jesus Christ is Lord,
to the glory of God the Father. (Phil 2:6–11, NIV slightly adapted)

This poem has received an enormous amount of scholarly attention (see, e.g., Wright, 1986; Hooker, 1990; Oakes, 2001; Eastman, 2010; Fletcher-Louis, 2020). For our purposes, the crucial observation concerns the "mindset" (*phronēsis*) of the Son of God (Phil 2:5). Paul celebrates the Son who refused to exploit his status but, instead, chose to empty himself and to assume adamic humanity. Indeed, the incarnate Son humbled himself in unwavering obedience to the Father—even to the point of death by crucifixion. And precisely because of this, the Father gladly exalted the Son and bestowed upon him the divine name: Lord Jesus Christ! (Phil 2:10–11; cf. Isa 45:23).

As is often the case with encomium (a speech focused on praise), the apostle's interest is not simply to praise the cosmic ruler but also to inculcate his "mindset" in the ethos of the community. That is, Paul wants the Messiah's *phronēsis* to govern his body and its various members: "Let the same mind be in you (*touto phroneite en humin*) that was in Christ Jesus" (Phil 2:5; cf. 2:2). The verb *phroneō* occurs ten times in Philippians and entails the "comprehensive pattern of thinking, feeling, and acting" (Fowl, 2005, p.6) that undergirds the moral reasoning of the community (cf. Johnson, 2003). The Pauline imperative is thus for the body collective

to be governed by and to embody a Christ-shaped *phronēsis*, the pattern of divine humility and humiliation disclosed in the encomium.

Such humility undergirds the imperative, "in humility value others above yourselves" (Phil 2:3, NIV). The members of the body are to regard their interests, privileges, and status as Christ regarded his (2:6). In so doing, Paul calls the holy ones in Philippi to the inhabit the new space designated "in Christ" (Thate, 2014). Within this space, humility is not an abstract virtue but participation in the life and life-pattern of the incarnate Son. Paul envisages the telos of life as the imitation of Christ, and he calls on the Philippians to do the same, that is, to become "co-imitators" (3:17).

The apostle implores the Philippians to assume the Christ-shaped *phronēsis* precisely because he is convinced that the Holy Spirit is at work "among you." The inferential imperative of 2:12, "therefore, my dear friends…continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling," only makes sense in light of the supportive claim of verse 13, "for it is God who works in you to will and to act in order to fulfill his good purposes" (NIV). The apostle's language entails, as Susan Eastman (2017) aptly states,

> a thoroughly intersubjective notion of human personhood, in which God works conatively, cognitively, and effectively within the person, yet the human agent remains distinct and addressable by the imperative, "Work out your salvation." Paul links the divine indicative to the human imperative, and God's action to human action, resulting in the language of "willing" and "working," with its implications of an effective union of thought and action, initiative and follow-through. (Eastman, 2017, p. 128)

Each person learns to internalize humility (or more broadly, *li*) through their participation in the social body (so Confucius). The critical distinction is that Christ-shaped humility is generated by the self-emptying Son of God and actualized in the community by the Holy Spirit.

Conclusion and Implications

Christ-shaped humility speaks to the cultural tensions and social pressures second-generation Korean American Christians currently face. First, it grounds our understanding of humility in the incarnation, which, as Macaskill (2018) notes, is "[t]he crucial element that binds the individual, the communal, and the cosmic together in Paul's narrative" (p. 86). Christ then, is both the generative source and, through the Spirit, is the effective cause of *li* (propriety or proper conduct).

Second, we affirm that biblical humility is a *communal* virtue.

Humility is what the body collective does when it embodies and participates in the Jesus story as outlined by Paul in Philippians 2:6–11. Second-generation Korean Americans can have confidence that many of the values they have inherited, such as a communitarian account of humility, resonate with Scripture's vision for church. The creator God does indeed call us to maintain a particular kind of social order, one governed by the *phronēsis* of the incarnate Son of God.

Second-generation Korean American Christians continue to navigate complex cultural tensions, including, as we have focused on in this article, competing notions of humility. In light of this reality, we offer a few suggestions for churches and pastors.

First, it is essential that churches create structures and spaces for second-generation Korean Americans to explore their Christian identity *while straddling competing cultural tensions*. For example, Korean American churches might evaluate the extent to which they have considered the particular interests and concerns of the second generation. This would involve an assessment of current leadership structures, the content of preaching and teaching, and long-term plans for innovation, among other things. Multiethnic churches, or churches that aspire to be multiethnic, should consider offering cultural competency courses and/or seminars that attend to traditional East Asian values and how East Asian immigrant communities have navigated the dominant US culture.

Second, many pastors and faith leaders recognize that American individualism presents serious challenges to a biblical vision of life together. We would argue that second-generation Korean Americans are well-positioned to guide those who see the world primarily through an individualistic lens to a richer, more communal (i.e., biblical) understanding of their faith (Rah 2009, p. 187).

Lastly, it is vital to the mission and witness of the church that we continue to explore *theologically* how different cultures see the world. For better or for worse (probably a bit of both) American evangelicalism has had an outsized influence on global Christianity. But the Bible is not a "Western" book, nor is Christianity the possession of "Western culture." The goal is not to set East and West in conflict but to live more fully into our identity as God's children: to receive our fellow image-bears as gifts, to learn from one another, and most importantly, to love one another well.

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