

Being Called “Kirisuto-san” or “a Christ”: Re-visiting Christian Identity in Post-disaster Japan

Takashi Yoshida

Introduction

I would like to start this lecture expressing my deep appreciation as a Japanese pastor, especially one who had been in the disaster area until last year, to Fuller Theological Seminary for their willingness to help out Japanese churches through concerning this unique project of initiating theological symposiums.

The main theme of the symposiums is “How can we start again? Centennial Vision for Post-disaster Japan.” To put it another way, it intends to take the triple disaster—earthquake, tsunami, and nuclear power plant accident—as a *kairos* from God, and to reconsider various aspects of Japanese Christianity theologically and practically in order to open up a new missional vision for this country and the world.

As we focused on the church in the second symposium, this symposium tries to reflect upon Christian identity, mainly because in such a place as a disaster area not only co-operative but also individual work did and still does matter. In fact, it is because of the trust-relationships which so many Christian workers have created with sufferers there since 2011 that their ministries are still accepted and appreciated by the local people. And it is exactly in such a situation that sufferers often call them “*Kirisuto-san*” or “a Christ,” which is a rarely used title for Japanese Christians.

Let me tell a story about a pastor who has visited the disaster area many times. He visited suffering people one by one, asking them about

their needs and about what he could possibly bring to them. He did this again and again. One day, when he visited an old lady as usual, she asked him “What do you have today?” “Nothing today, Ma’am” he replied, “but I’ll try to bring what you need.” But she said, “I don’t need anything but your visit. It gives me a joy. You guys are bearing (representing) ‘Christ,’ aren’t you?” That was the moment he realized that he had nothing but Christ, just like Peter at the gate called “Beautiful” (Acts 3:6).

He was taught by a disaster victim about the truth he didn’t even realize. In other words, it might have been in his attitude of forgetting about himself and just concentrating what he could do for this old lady that she saw ‘Christ’ in him. If that is the case, we may be able to learn something important from this fact about what a “Christian” means and what we “Christians” are supposed to do for the Gospel in this world. This is the topic of my lecture.

1. The title “Christian”: its historical overview

A. New Testament

According to the Book of Acts, it is in Antioch, an ancient Greek-Roman city where the disciples of Jesus of Nazareth were for the first time called “Christians” (11:26). It seems that this title soon became known, as King Agrippa said to Paul “Do you think that in such a short time you can persuade me to be a Christian?” Another example in the New Testament in which the title appears is in I Peter 4:16. There Peter exhorts the believers who are suffering from persecution in the Asia Minor, writing that “if you suffer, it should not be as a murderer or thief or any other kind of criminal, or even as a meddler. However, if you suffer as a Christian, do not be ashamed, but praise God that you bear that name.”

The title “Christian” is, therefore, not a title the disciples invented by themselves but a kind of an offensive and insulting term used by the Gentiles who didn’t even know exactly what the term “Christ” meant.

B. Extra-biblical literature

The title “Christian” actually appears in extra-biblical literatures as well. One of the earliest documents is a letter to Emperor Trajan around 112 AD from Pliny, the Roman governor of Bithynia-Pontus, the same area to which Peter sent the letter above, asking his counsel on dealing with “Christians,” now prevailing so much in the area, whether he should punish them based on the crimes they committed or just on their being “Christians.”

In *The Twelve Caesars*, Suetonius, a close friend of Pliny the Younger, reported that in the reign of Nero, “punishment was inflicted on the Christians, a class of men given to a new and mischievous superstition”(IV:16). This punishment by Nero of the Christians was also described in detail in Tacitus’ *Annals* (15:44) as follows:

Nero fastened the guilt and inflicted the most exquisite tortures on a class hated for their abominations, called Christians by the populace. Christus, from whom the name had its origin, suffered the extreme penalty during the reign of Tiberius at the hands of one of our procurators, Pontius Pilatus, and a most mischievous superstition, thus checked for the moment, again broke out not only in Judæa, the first source of the evil, but even in Rome, where all things hideous and shameful from every part of the world find their centre and become popular.

These documents unequivocally show hatred and contempt by their authors for the Christians who believed the illegal superstition in the Empire, without knowing the difference between “Christus” and “Chrestus”(Cf. Suetonius, *The Twelve Caesars*, V:25:4; Tertullian, *Apologeticum*, 3:5).

On the other hand, among the Jews who did know what “Christ,”

anointed one, meant, it seems that the Christians were rather called “the Nazarene sect” (Acts 24:5) or “the Nazarenes” (Cf. Tertullian, *Adversus Marcionem*, 4:8).

C. Early Christian literature

Although the title “Christian” seems to have brought only a repugnant or abominable image to the Gentiles and the Jews, early Christians dared to take it positively as an honorable name of themselves, as the text of I Peter 4:16 shows. We can find the earliest example of this in the letters of Ignatius, a bishop of Antioch, where the title was used for the first time.

In his *Letter to the Romans* (3:2), he writes that:

Only request in my behalf both inward and outward strength, that I may not only speak, but [truly] will, so that I may not merely be called a Christian, but really found to be one. For if I be truly found [a Christian], I may also be called one, and be then deemed faithful, when I shall no longer appear to the world.

In other words, the title now came to be recognized by the believers and their leaders as an indicator of their identity, that is, one belonging to Christ, bearing His name, or even living truly in accordance with His name.

D. Medieval legend of “Christophoros (Christ-bearer)”

This might be a good place to mention the name of “Christophoros” or “Christopher” in English. It is said that he was a martyr in the 3rd century and became very popular in the Middle ages mainly through the book called *Golden Legend*.

According to the legendary account, he was a fearsome big Canaanite man. As he wished to serve the greatest king, he went to one of the strongest kings. But he found that the king was afraid of the devil. So, he

then turned to be a servant of the devil. Nonetheless, he came to know, again, that the devil feared Christ. So, again, he left him to serve the one called Christ. Enquiring from people where to find Christ, he met a hermit who instructed him on how to serve Christ. Since he was too lazy to pray without ceasing and too gluttonous to fast, the hermit advised him that it would be pleasing to Christ for him, a big guy, to help people to cross a dangerous river. So, he did. One day, as he faithfully kept performing this service, a little child asked the giant man to take him across the river. During the crossing, the child got so heavy that he could scarcely carry him and found himself in great difficulty. When he finally reached the other side, he said to the child: “You have put me in the greatest danger. I do not think the whole world could have been as heavy on my shoulders as you were.” The child replied: “You had on your shoulders not only the whole world but Him who made it. I am Christ your king, whom you are serving by this work. Now, you name yourself Christophoros because you carried me.” The child then disappeared.

Legends often reflect people’s spirituality and their ideal image of a Christian. The story of Christophoros tells us that a Christian should be someone representing Christ, who also bore the sufferings of people in the world. In fact, this kind of Mediaeval spirituality prevailed among not only clergy but also lay people at the end of the 15th Century in a spiritual movement known as “Devotio Moderna (Modern Devotion)” from which a book, *Imitatio Christi (The Imitation of Christ)*, was produced.

E. Reformation Era

It flowed into the spirituality of Ignatius of Loyola and his book, *Spiritual Exercises*, representing that of the Society of Jesus in the Roman Catholic tradition, on the one hand. In the Protestant tradition, on the other, one of the best examples which reflect the “Imitatio Christi” spirituality is in the book of John Calvin.

In his notable *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, there is a section on the Christian life. This section was separately printed and translated into English already in the 16th century, and thus probably was influential for the later Puritans. There, Calvin wrote as follows:

It exhibits God the Father, who, as he hath reconciled us to himself in his Anointed, has impressed his image upon us, to which he would have us to be conformed.... [Scripture] adds, that Christ, through whom we have returned to favour with God, is set before us as a model, the image of which our lives should express (III:6:3).

This is the place to address those who, having nothing of Christ but the name and sign, would yet be called Christians. How dare they boast of this sacred name? None have intercourse with Christ but those who have acquired the true knowledge of him from the Gospel (III:6:4).

According to Calvin, the title of a “Christian” is not just a name or sign. Life of a Christian is a life to express an image of Christ, even if they cannot do it perfectly. Then, he discusses on bearing the cross as one way to live out the Christian life in the world (III:8). Hence, this section clearly shows the biblical and traditional idea of what the title “Christian” means.

Now, we are going to consider how we, bearing the name of “Christ,” can truly witness to Him or become a “*Kirisuto-san*,” especially in the mission field context.

2. A “Christian” in terms of mission

A. Mission and social responsibility: The Lausanne Covenant (1974)

First, we would like to refer to one of the most significant documents that has greatly influenced the concept of mission and church among

Evangelicals, namely, The Lausanne Covenant. In the section on “Christian social responsibility,” it reads:

We express penitence both for our neglect and for having sometimes regarded evangelism and social concern as mutually exclusive. Although reconciliation with other people is not reconciliation with God, nor is social action evangelism, nor is political liberation salvation, nevertheless we affirm that evangelism and socio-political involvement are both part of our Christian duty. For both are necessary expressions of our doctrines of God and man, our love for our neighbor and our obedience to Jesus Christ.... The salvation we claim should be transforming us in the totality of our personal and social responsibilities. Faith without works is dead.

What interests me is that evangelism and socio-political involvement are “necessary expressions of our doctrines of God and man, our love for our neighbor and our obedience to Jesus Christ.” As a matter of fact, in the history of Christianity, Christian churches and believers have responded almost instinctively, as it were, on behalf of people who were suffering and oppressed.

B. The work of love in Church history

Let us take a few examples. In the decadent and pagan society of the Roman Empire, it was Christians who saved the lives of young widows, orphans, and slaves. Their deeds had a great impact on the Pagan society. As the European society itself became a Christian Empire with a gigantic social system in which many weak and poor people were ignored, monasteries became a sort of welfare institution where monks were involved in caring for those people as a way to serve the Lord. Although the Reformers abolished the monastic system itself, they retained the diaconal work as one of the most significant aspects of the Christian community.

In the process of secularization and industrialization in the Protestant nations, when there appeared so many poor people and children, forsaken people, in the rapid change of the society, voluntary groups of Christians took actions to help them out. And last, not least, it is well-known that in the modern history of foreign missions, missionaries often evangelized undeveloped lands not only with the Gospel in words, but in deeds as well, especially in the areas of medicine, education, and various forms of social welfare.

C. Theological foundations for the work of love

i. God of the poor

When God commands us to consider the weak and love one's neighbor, He often identifies Himself with the weak and suffering. The God of Israel is not the one who stays "up there" without caring for His people. We need to be aware of what God fixes His eyes on.

ii. "Because you were also..."

In many so-called humane laws, we repeatedly find the phrase "for you were also..." as in "Do not mistreat or oppress a foreigner, for you were foreigners in Egypt" (Ex 22:20), "Do not oppress a foreigner; you yourselves know how it feels to be foreigners, because you were foreigners in Egypt" (Ex 23:9). God never says "Do this, because you are elected or privileged people." In other words, the work of mercy must be done with humble attitudes and on the same eye level as that of the people who are cared for.

iii. The Teachings and model of Jesus Christ

In the Gospel narratives, Jesus not only identified himself with "a small child" (Mk 9:37) and "the least one" (Mt 25:40) who is hungry, thirsty, and sick, but also with a miserably hurt man in the parable of the Good Samaritan (Lk 10:25ff), for he told the story from the man's perspective.

Besides his teachings, he showed as well a model of how his disciples are supposed to be, by washing their dirty feet, for example, just like a servant (Jn 13:1ff. Cf. Mk 10:45, Phil 2:6–8). His model of love, however, has another aspect, namely, the Gospel of being, as it were. Jesus was abusively called “a glutton and a drunkard,” and “a friend of tax collectors and sinners” (Mt 11:19). If you don’t want to be a friend of them, you don’t have to have fellowship with them and can keep yourself holy. But if you wanted to be their friend, you would eat and drink with them, wouldn’t you? The beloved word of Jesus “Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest” (Mt 11:28) is, therefore, not just a catchy phrase to attract people, but words stating a fact. He did invite or come himself to those who were weary and burdened, and he did give them rest. By what? Maybe by his message which, I can imagine, must have been very interesting and full of comforting words to them. But more probably because of his presence. People must have felt joy, I believe, when they stayed with him. In other words, the life of Jesus Christ itself was the Gospel, the Gospel of being.

I would also like to mention in this context the Markan version of Jesus’ great commission “Go into all the world and preach the gospel to all creation”(16:15) though there is, of course, a textual problem. Here, Jesus said not “all the people” but “all creation.” Catholic people might think of the episode where Francisco of Assisi preached to birds and animals. The text clearly signifies human beings by the term “creation.” Nonetheless, if we take Paul’s words in Romans chapter 8 seriously, it must be true that all “creation waits in eager expectation for the children of God to be revealed” (8:19ff). It seems that the children of God, in this case, implies not just Christians but those who participate in God’s work of renewal of the world, striving to remove sorrows and sufferings out of people’s lives and bring them joy in the Lord.

D. The mission based on love

Hence, it seems quite clear what “necessary expressions of our doctrines of God and man, and our obedience to Jesus Christ” are supposed to be. For this, I would like to quote here another important paragraph from the Lausanne Covenant (6. The Church and Evangelism):

We need to break out of our ecclesiastical ghettos and permeate non-Christian society. In the Church’s mission of sacrificial service evangelism is primary.... [A] church which preaches the cross must itself be marked by the cross. It becomes a stumbling block to evangelism when it betrays the gospel or lacks a living faith in God, a genuine love for people, or scrupulous honesty in all things including promotion and finance.

Love must be sincere (Rom 12:9). Whether Christians minister to people, like the victims of the disaster truly from love *or* from any other secret intention and motivation will become apparent sooner or later. I am very grateful and even proud of the various support activities by Christian churches and groups, that are still continuing and appreciated in the disaster area.

What we have learned from the experience of 3.11 is, therefore, not merely some know-how about support, but the very essence of the Christian mission.

In light of this, we can surely discuss the Cape Town Commitment, published in the year before the disaster of 2011. The keynote throughout the document is love. Let us quote some sentences, related to our topic:

We affirm that such comprehensive biblical love should be the defining identity and hallmark of disciples of Jesus.... So we

re-commit ourselves afresh to make every effort to live, think, speak and behave in ways that express what it means to walk in love—love for God, love for one another and love for the world. (Pt.I:1:D)

God commands us to reflect his own character through compassionate care for the needy, and to demonstrate the values and the power of the kingdom of God in striving for justice and peace and in caring for God’s creation. (Pt.I:10:B)

A) As disciples of Christ we are called to be people of truth.

1. We must *live* the truth. To live the truth is to be the face of Jesus, through whom the glory of the gospel is revealed to blinded minds. People will see truth in the faces of those who live their lives for Jesus, in faithfulness and love. (Pt.II:A:1)

‘We are the aroma of Christ.’[71] Our calling is to live and serve among people of other faiths in a way that is so saturated with the fragrance of God’s grace that they smell Christ, that they come to taste and see that God is good. By such embodied love, we are to make the gospel attractive in every cultural and religious setting. When Christians love people of other faiths through lives of love and acts of service, they embody the transforming grace of God. (Pt.II:C:3)

What a powerful image it is for us to be “the face of Jesus” and “embody the transforming grace of God” for the world.

One of the reasons why these claims were made, may be the reality that Evangelical churches now face such criticisms as Philip Yancey has pointed out in his recently published book, *Vanishing Grace: What Ever Happened to the Good News?:* The Evangelicals bring the sense of guilt rather than the Good News; they look at people as objects of evangelism rather than human beings; they tend to contact people with a sense of

superiority or judging mind; they prefer talking to listening sincerely. Yancey writes that these attitudes must have been formulated by the distorted understanding of the Gospel of Jesus, and claims that we Christians should take back its essence of Grace.

E. The embodiment of the Gospel

Evangelicals used to discuss earnestly the contextualization of the Gospel. What we now need to consider seriously may be rather the embodiment of the Gospel or becoming “the face of Jesus,” if we employ the term from The Cape Town Commitment. This does not mean to force our understanding of the good news. It rather means to “please our neighbors for their good, to build them up. For even Christ did not please himself” (Rom 15:2–3). It is to work for others to heal their spiritual wounds, often with a sense of being accepted or forgiven, to bring back their smiles and joy for them to start over their lives. This is the Gospel, at least its essential part, which Jesus has brought to this sinful world by his presence. And it is exactly when we sincerely face people in sufferings and listen carefully to the voice of their heart, and when we often have no easy word of comfort for their serious reality, but cry together, pray together, and try to walk together with them, that not we, but the love of God and its profound grace deep inside of us will appear.

Conclusion

I very much appreciate this special opportunity of theological reflection on tasks which Christian churches and believers face in post-disaster Japan. We should not, however, end this symposium with a mere intellectual satisfaction as if we have solved the problems of forgotten people in the affected area of Tohoku and those afraid of the ongoing radioactive contamination in Fukushima without mentioning so many other social issues in this country.

We Christians are regularly overcome by a sense of powerlessness. Nonetheless, we still do carry that precious name on ourselves. Even more, we ourselves are carried by Jesus Christ day by day. That is why we are able to take courage to live together with the disaster victims and bear their crosses together, just as Jesus did. And this should be the meaning of our being called "*Kirisuto-san*," in post-disaster Japan.