

Exploring Biblical Theology from a historical perspective can lay the foundation for a Chinese Contextual Theology in the New Era

基督教中国化的基础性工程：试从教会史层面
论新时代中国化释经神学

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The newly revised Church Order of the Chinese Protestant Church and the Five-Year Plan for Promoting the Further Contextualization of Christianity in China (2018-2022) 《中国基督教教会规章》和《推进我国基督教中国化五年工作规划纲要（2018-2022）》(referred to as “the Plan”) show the theological self-awareness of Chinese churches and their path of action in the new era. Basic doctrine constitutes the essence of the Church’s faith; the openness of biblical interpretation keeps theology advancing with the times, and the publicity of biblical interpretation allows the Church to bear ethical witness. In the twenty-first century, while adhering to the basic doctrine and canon, we must respect the tradition of the Chinese Church in “exalting the Bible” 高举圣经, establish a system of theological and biblical hermeneutics that are compatible with socialist society, draw lessons from the history of biblical interpretation, focus on the openness of biblical truth, pay attention to the publicity of Christian theology, and contextualize the reinterpretation of the doctrine and church canon for Chinese Christianity.

Not only is this the way for the Chinese Church to survive and thrive but it is also the ardent hope and call of the Party and the government.

It is also an inevitable path for the Church to take in integrating with fine Chinese cultural traditions and developing a “Chinese Christianity.” By grasping the fundamentals of the theological interpretation of the Bible (hereinafter referred to as TIB,) the Church’s political identity, social adaptation, cultural integration and unity in the post-denominational era can enable it to become established, as “a tree with roots and a brook with a source.”

However, the top-level design and appeal must be implemented in the specific construction of the church’s theological interpretation of the Bible, so we must focus on the ethical direction, theological basis and the exegesis of specific scriptures for the contextualized TIB, so as to facilitate contextualization at the pulpits of grass-roots churches and establish the Chinese Church’s selfhood in exegetical theology. This article attempts to briefly discuss this topic from such aspects as church history, the history of biblical interpretation, theological hermeneutics, and the guiding role of the socialist core values in TIB.

1. The role of TIB in the process of further contextualization of Chinese Christianity

- 1.1. Contextualized exegesis is the source of the Church’s vitality
 - 1.1.1 Consciousness of the theological interpretation of the Bible in the Chinese Church

Chinese churches have always had the tradition of “exalting the Bible.” “All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, so that everyone who belongs to God may be proficient, equipped for every good work” (2 Tim. 3:16-17 NRSV). Christianity is a religion so much rooted in the scriptures that it is even described as a ‘religion of the book.’

The diversity and unity of theological thinking in the Bible endorses the fact that theology is always contextualized, reflecting the dynamic, living relationship between God and humans as well as the survival law of faith groups, and furnishing the theological basis for future generations to reinterpret the Bible. Theology, in effect, is the interpretation of scripture, canon law, religious traditions, and religious experience in response to the survival needs of the church.¹

All theological doctrines are some kind of hermeneutics—studies and practices in attempts to interpret and govern church survival. Biblical exegesis has always been fundamental to both the Jewish and the Christian faith. The purpose and attribution of all theological interpretations is to explain and comprehend the living conditions of the Church in its context. In other words, to explain what is revealed in the Bible means to make sense of human existence.² Since doctrines, canons and creeds are all contextualized, TIB is crucial and makes it even more important to interpret and reinterpret the Bible. The Chinese Church is acutely aware of the significance of TIB and theological hermeneutics, beginning with the theological mass movement of the 1950s to the Reconstruction of Theological Thinking advocated by Bishop K. H. Ting 丁光训主教 in the 1990s and present attempts to further contextualize Chinese Christianity—all these reflect a theological self consciousness.

The theological interpretation of the Bible is based on biblical theology. Readers are encouraged to harness the achievements of rigorous biblical research (including hermeneutics in its general sense) to interpret the Bible from a certain theological point of view, heeding not only God's actions in history but also God's will in today's society

1 Francis Schüssler Fiorenza, *Systematic Theology: Task and Method*, vol.1, Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991, 13-14.

2 Rudolf Bultmann, *The Presence of Eternity*, Westport: Greenwood Press, 1975, 1-11.

and culture.³ Therefore, there is a close relationship between the theological interpretation of the Bible and disciplines such as theological hermeneutics. Biblical interpretation is the source and a fundamental component of theology, while theological views in turn affect the interpretation of the Bible.⁴ For more than seventy years, Chinese churches have grown up together with the New China, and the sinicized theological interpretation of the scriptures is both a topic in theological theory and an ethical practice of the Chinese church. Thus theological interpretations of the Bible with Chinese characteristics is not only an agenda for developing theological theory, but also a necessary ministry of the Chinese Church.

“The history of the Church is also a history of the interpretation of the Bible by the Church, and the studies of biblical interpretation consist of the experiences and consensus of the Church accumulated in exegetical history.”⁵

This consensus, that is, hermeneutical theology, is more important than the specific interpretation of a certain passage. The consensus formed by the Chinese Church in her own context is crucial to the survival of the Chinese Church. The interpretation of Chinese theology is to rally the consensus of the Chinese Church in the new era. Theological interpretation of the Bible is the communal thinking of Chinese Churches and Chinese theological interpretation is the accumulation of Chinese churches’ biblical interpretations in the new era. The exploration of TIB is also closely related to the establishment and unity of church fellowships which are critical to the building up of institutional and doctrinal selfhood in the post-denominational era, and realizing the contextualization of Chinese Christianity.

3 See Kevin Vanhoozer, editor-in-chief, *Dictionary of Theological Interpretation*, Hong Kong: Chinese Bible Association Ltd., 2014, 21.

4 *Ibid.*, 744.

5 Li-chen Tsai, *Who Says that the Letter Kills—A Hermeneutical Study of the Paradigm Shift*, Taipei: Campus Study Press, 2014, 3.

It has been pointed out by Bishop Ting that, “The Bible unites us.”⁶ A correct view of the bible is vital for the reconstruction of theological thinking in the Chinese Church. The key point of a holistic biblical view consists in recognizing the diversity and complexity of the ideological world and the faith testimonies embodied in the biblical canons as well as the complexity of church life and tradition. The Church therefore should, under the principles of rationality and diversity, maintain a proper relationship between God and humans and bear witness that is God-fearing and neighbor-loving. The history of the Church and Christian thought shows that the diverse and unified interpretation of the Bible is an important prerequisite for the unity of the Church. For more than two thousand years, there have been many different opinions and interpretations of the Bible in Christianity. However, the Bible has withstood misinterpretation by various heresies and survived the comments of scholars from all sides. Therefore, the study of the biblical view, especially the various interpretative approaches in the history of the Church in the past two thousand years is itself a significant theological research topic.

The Bible itself also reflects the process of constant adjustment in Hebrew theological thinking. Jews were the earliest recipients, witnesses and interpreters of the Bible while Christian theology has developed new interpretations and understandings. In the twenty-first century, the theological interpretation of the Bible is confronted with pluralism and ambiguity arising from religious and cultural dialogues. The biblical view of history can illuminate the present and future theology of biblical interpretation.

6 Quoted from Chen Yilu: “The Trilogy of Chinese Christianity Towards Unity,” *Nanjing Theological Review*, no. 2, 2019.

Therefore, the topic “Perceptions of Biblical Tradition” should be studied by taking into consideration the history of Jewish thought and the history of the development of Christian theology, especially the history of the Chinese Church and her thinking. The history of Christian thought and church history consists of the history of the constant understanding, re-understanding and re-interpreting of biblical truth. All kinds of controversies and even wars in history, can be traced to the theological interpretation of the Bible concerning concepts of God, church, Christology, the Holy Spirit, creation, soteriology, eschatology, humanism and Christian ethics.

Both the New and Old Testaments reflect what was part of the culture of the times when these biblical texts emerged. Culture is the comprehensive embodiment of people’s way of life. The interpretation of the Bible is also a part of culture. The createdness of human beings convinces us that the peculiarities of Christian culture should not be regarded as simply the product of a particular social group that is self-sufficient and lives behind closed doors. History has proven that Christians continue to maintain social interactions with non-Christians whose ways of living and boundaries with Christians are fluid and permeable; thus Christian culture should be interpreted in a wider cultural context. What unites Christians is not the basic common beliefs, but a project of cultural construction—that includes academic activities and the practices of daily Christian life.⁷ Therefore, biblical theology and exegesis have turned out to be a history of interaction between Christians and non-Christians, that incorporates the intermingling of sacred and secular elements. To contextualize the interpretation of the Bible in the new era is the more urgent task and path of survival for the Chinese Church.

7 Kathryn Tanner, “Cultural Theory,” in John Webster, Kathryn Tanner, and Iain Torrance (eds) *Oxford Handbook of Systematic Theology*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2007, 541 .

1.1.2 Theological interpretation is the way for the church to survive.

Church history attests to the fact that establishing a proper system of contextualized theological hermeneutics is the way to survive for faith communities. The doctrine, canon and creeds of the catholic church very accurately define the nature of Christian faith and the identity of the Christian Church, and are the universally recognized standards of Christianity. However, we should also see that these rules of faith, in essence, are theological interpretations of the Bible by the ancient catholic Church, in the context of Greek philosophical thinking and language used around the Mediterranean region in the Greco-Roman cultural context. These reflected the living conditions of the Church, the relationship between Church and state, and the Church's ethical responses at the time. It was essentially a public theology in the context of Greco-Roman or Westernized Christianity, that later developed a Constantinian ecclesiastical theology and church-state relations whose strengths and weaknesses are well known. That is to say, the Church does not have to be the power center of society. As a marginalized group, it can be more like the Israelites, taking on the responsibility of being the servant of Jehovah and being light to the world.⁸

In early church history, both Orthodox Christian churches and heretical sects expanded their influence through churches activities, especially preaching and charitable activities. Marcion, a wealthy shipowner traveled to Rome and donated large sums of money to religious groups, attracting large audiences similar to those of the Gnostics and the sorcerer Simon. Therefore, our investigation of heresy in early Christianity cannot be confined to the purely speculative field of "theological controversy," but must extend to include the living conditions and social context of the entire faith community.

8 Liu Zhenpeng: "Exploring Yoda's Jeremiah Model—Reflecting on its ethical significance and its 'public' significance," *Journal of Mountain Road*, Hong Kong: Hong Kong Baptist Theological Seminary, no. 1, 2013.

The issue of “orthodoxy” and “heresy” faced by the early church is in essence the battle for survival and space between the apostolic succession as testified in the Bible, particularly by the New Testament canon, and the heresies, along with extremist ideas. By examining church history, we can draw the conclusion that heresies and some “divergent” factions, which go to extremes in doctrinal debates within orthodox churches, often abandon the most reasonable kernel of the faith proclaimed by the Bible, witnessed and practiced by the apostles: that is, cosmopolitanism, a balanced approach to creation and redemption, the relationship between this life and the afterlife, and the testimony of Christians’ faith, hope and love in the present life. This balanced and open-minded core of the faith in the early church is the fundamental reason why Christianity survived the harshness of the Roman Empire and continues till this day, becoming the world religion with the largest number of believers and the greatest influence, something which heresies have failed to do for they flourish for a while and finally disappear or make a face-lift and reappear in another way. Heresies and radical thinking were rife in early Christianity, even more numerous than the number of famous apologists at the time. This is both a theoretical and practical issue that must be given great attention in the further contextualization of Chinese Christianity.

1.2. Contextualized theological interpretation of the Bible in China: the basic project in the further contextualization of Chinese Christianity

Speeches by Party and government leaders have clearly depicted the real situation of Chinese religions including Christianity, and emphasized the positive significance of actively expounding doctrines and scriptures so as to promote the adaptation of religions to socialist society. General Secretary Xi Jinping clearly stated: “The Party is the core of leadership in our various undertakings. The ancients said that ‘six rivers share the same wind and the nine continents share the same experience.’ In contemporary China, without the

leadership of the Party, this cannot be done.”⁹ In the new era, theological interpretation of the Bible in Chinese Christianity must make theological reflections in accordance with the conditions in China. To carry out theological interpretation that adapts to socialism in the new era is the ardent hope of the Party and the state, which regards the theological interpretation of the Bible from the loftier perspective of national economy and people’s livelihood, and as the major foundational project for the further contextualization of Chinese Christianity. This is to elevate the theological interpretation of the Bible to the level of the “political” 讲政治, which requires Christians to assume social and political responsibilities as citizens and members of civic groups.

Christians and church groups must theologially analyze and view the world beyond the four walls of the church and take into account all worldly factors as the raw materials for our theological interpretation. This is the “here and now” 此在 of Chinese Christians and churches. The focal point of the creeds universally recognized by the catholic church lies in Christology, especially the debate over the divinity and humanity of Christ. The Apostles’ Creed, the Nicene Creed, the Chalcedonian Creed, and Christian denominations’ emphasis and adherence to various doctrinal canons are the precious legacies of theological hermeneutics left to us by history. However, we should also note that the apologists, church fathers and Christian philosophers, after the “Logos Doctrine” of John’s Gospel, used Plato’s dualism, absolutism in Greek philosophy, and Aristotle’s philosophy of “substance” and “form” to theologially interpret the Bible.

9 Xi Jinping: “The Leadership of the Communist Party of China is the Most Essential Feature of Socialism with Chinese Characteristics,” *Qiushi*, no. 14, 2020.

The theological interpretation of the Bible intentionally or unintentionally obscured the dynamics of the “living God” believed in by Hebrews (including Jews of the New Testament era, and even Jesus Christ himself), such as the “human nature” of God in the Old Testament, who likes to set up tents and walk with people on earth. And to transform the “living Word” of the Gospel of John into “the ruler of the universe” under whom is a strict system of ecclesial hierarchy and social class barriers that demarcate the sacred and the secular. The standard image of God became that of a ruler who is immutable, immovable, ruthless, omniscient and omnipresent. Man’s social class and human agency became either solidified or were compelled to be pursued only inwardly—this was the social and theological cause of the emergence of spiritual practitioners such as Thomas À Kempis, and Madame Jeanne Guyon in the Middle Ages. Using these philosophical factors to explain the way of the living God as revealed in the Bible, the Word in the human world and the incarnate life of the Word, leads to the separation of the divine and the human. This, coupled with the overemphasis on the concept of “original sin,” ontologically exacerbates the human sense of incompetence and alienation from God.

However, the guiding ideology of socialism in the new era is to integrate the best elements in traditional Chinese culture, emphasize human agency and advocate that “happiness comes from struggle.” To turn the blueprint into reality and carry out the reform to the end, will call for the spirit of struggle, which does not rush into fantasy, does not make false promises, and does not hesitate to take substantive steps to complete the task. Heaven rewards diligence and makes changes with each passing day.”¹⁰ Emphasizing the core values of socialism is the contextualization of Marxism in the twenty-first century.

This is the spiritual heritage of China in the new era and the main theme of the times. This spirit and its ethical effects can be fully integrated with the covenant-keeping, self-improving, civilizational, harmonious, and patriotic values spawned from

the practice of a Godly way of life in the Bible; and in terms of the effectiveness of ethical actions, they can be fully combined by Chinese Christians. Therefore, Chinese Christianity in the new era desperately needs to give birth to its own theological interpretation of the Bible. The contextual interpretation of the bible and hermeneutics mentioned in this article is not only the speculative theology of scholars in the study, but also an invitation and an active call for the transformation of theological interpretation within and without the Church, focusing on the “here and now” of the Chinese Church: “We should constantly promote the harmonious development of party, religious and class relations, and relations between compatriots at home and abroad ... Religions should keep taking new steps to adapt themselves to socialist society and enhance the political, ideological, theoretical and emotional identification with the Communist Party of China.”¹¹ This is a clear reminder for the Church to correctly analyze and determine the relationship between traditional biblical exegesis and the actual context, and to respond to and even assess the theological direction of biblical interpretation brought to us by Protestant missionaries in the past two hundred years. “Tradition ... does not report ‘naked facts’ ... In all traditional forms, it is virtually impossible to distinguish between historical events and symbolic interpretations.”¹²

This reminds us that it is very important to decide on the angle from which to view history. The historical heritage of theology and church can only be truly inherited if it is used by us.

10 Xi Jinping, 2018 New Year Message, *Xinhua News Agency*, December 31, 2017,

<https://www.chinanews.com.cn/shipin/spfts/20171231/1325.shtml>.

11 Wang Yang: “Speech at the Symposium on Celebrating the 70th Anniversary of the Founding of the People’s Republic of China on the United Front on September 11, 2019.”

12 Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology* (Vol, 3), Trans, Lu Shengen, Tainan: Southeast Asian Theological Seminary Association, 1988, 382 .

Biblical interpretation, history and tradition are not only circular arguments of semantic philosophy, neither are they the review of Origen's interpretation of the Bible on the wings of Neo-Platonism, nor a repetition of the interpretation of the Antiochene School according to Judaism and Aristotelian philosophy. Instead, it is necessary to establish methodologies for the Church's existence—a method of theological thinking, theological interpretation, and ethical and cultural actions in the church context, and to directly explore the Bible, explore Jesus Christ and directly explore the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation. The Church Order of the Chinese Protestant Church (Revised Edition) has added the Confession of Faith which is only the beginning; "The Plan" can be regarded as a preliminary response to the call of the Party and the government for theological interpretation and transformation. However, the project of biblical interpretation and translation that has been started can now be seen as a key step in realizing the transformation of theological interpretation.

It conforms to and inherits the law explicit in the modern history of the Chinese Church and her thoughts, to search in them for the rationale for a theological interpretation of socialist society with Chinese characteristics in the new era. The theological interpretation of the Chinese Church in the new era is not only the spiritual mission of the Church, but also the political responsibility of every Christian as a citizen.

1.3 Establishing the theological selfhood of the Chinese Church in scriptural interpretation

Since its introduction into China, Chinese Christianity has been adhering to the interpretive tradition of the Reformation. "Religious reformers do not object to the thoughts of the church fathers," but rather advocate that the Bible should be interpreted in the context of "evolving church life." In the era of the Reformation, and also within the "reformed churches," different countries and regions had different contexts. Martin Luther realized that the Germanization of Christianity in its liturgy,

church institutions, and church-state relations, is in a sense a political theological practice representing the interests of the overwhelming majority of German citizens. In the new era of socialism, the further contextualization of the theological interpretation of the Bible is the way of survival for Chinese Christianity. Further contextualization is not only the objective requirement of the development of Chinese churches but also the ardent expectation of the Party and the government. Therefore, Biblical exegesis should reflect the publicity of theology, dig deep into church doctrine and canon for what is conducive to social harmony, and interpret them to meet the development requirements of contemporary China and to remain consistent with fine traditional Chinese culture.

The further contextualization of Chinese Christianity establishes its foundation on the Bible, adheres to basic Christian beliefs, inherits the tradition of the catholic church and the Reformation, takes root in the fertile soil of Chinese culture in faith and social practice, implements socialist core values, spreads the gospel, witnesses to Christ and runs the church well in its context.¹³ Chinese culture is rich and diversified; further contextualization does not require Christianity to change its basic beliefs. In China's broad cultural tradition, the further contextualization of Christianity does not require radical abandonment of the excellent western cultural elements in it but rather an active opening up and mutual absorption beyond the East and the West, which is a dynamic renewal and revival across the times.¹⁴

13 See the "Five-Year Plan for Promoting the Further Contextualization of Christianity in China (2018-2022)" in *Chinese Theological Review* 29, 6-26.

14 Ibid.

The “Word in the world” embodied in the Old Testament and the “Word become flesh” in the New Testament are always a spiritual mystery that can be recognized but can never be absolutely comprehended by the finite world and human beings. Even the Chalcedonian Creed, which is regarded as one of the important confessions of the universal church, only makes a confession about the connection between the divinity and humanity of Christ in a way similar to the contemporary dialectical theology: “one and the same Christ, Son, Lord, only-begotten, to be acknowledged in two natures, inconfusedly, unchangeably, indivisibly, inseparably; the distinction of natures being by no means taken away by the union, but rather the property of each nature being preserved, and concurring in one Person and one Subsistence, not parted or divided into two persons, but one and the same Son, and only begotten, God the Word, the Lord Jesus Christ.”¹⁵

The debate about divinity and human nature is essentially the debate over the sacred and the secular in the interpretation of the Bible. However church leaders in the Chinese cultural context, upholding the principle of seeking truth and being pragmatic, have well interpreted the creeds, doctrines and tradition from the perspective of ecclesiology and the theology of biblical interpretation. Church leaders such as Mr. Wu Yaozong (Y. T. Wu) 吴耀宗 and Bishop K. H. Ting attached great importance to the relationship between “the sacred and the secular” in theological thinking as well as the “human” factor in theology: “The most crucial thing in a changing world is Christians’ self-discovery and perfection. Because of the attention paid to humans, the relationship between divinity and human nature is dialectically manifested, highlighting the spiritual world of ‘human-believers,’ thus removing the fog that often exists in religious discussions and making them full of vitality and change.”¹⁶

15 The Chalcedonian Creed, in *Christian Creeds*, Shanghai: CCC&TSPM, 2004, 26 .

16 K. H. Ting, “Preface to the Chinese Translation of Oxford Christian History (illustrated edition)”, in John McMulle (ed), *Oxford Christian History*, Guiyang: Guizhou People’s Publishing House, 1995.

The “human” here is not only an individual person, but also the totality of human living conditions and various social relations. The theology generated from this is a theology that is timely and appropriate to the context. The theological ethos of Old Testament prophets, wise men, priests and other theological elites, as well as the rational interpretation of faith traditions and the renewal of theological thinking adapted to the times by the Lord Jesus and apostles in the New Testament, provide models for establishing the theological selfhood of Chinese churches today. Bishop Ting emphasized the adjustment of theological thought, in which the most direct and effective approach is to let theology guide the interpretation of the Bible; Professor Chen Zemin 陈泽民 claimed that “theology is a study of human beings”.¹⁷ 神学就是人学 This is a significant starting point for us to observe in the call for the transformation of the Church’s theological interpretation of the Bible in the new era of Chinese socialism. Theological exegesis is the technical interpretation of the bible, and this in turn guides the direction of technical interpretation. The ecclesiology, Christology, doctrine of God, pneumatology, creationism, and practical theology of Chinese Churches should be based on the theological interpretation of the Bible. We can say that the transformation in the theological interpretation of the Bible represents the changes in the church’s context; in other words, transformation is the key to survival for the church.

Chinese churches have always had the tradition of “exalting the Bible.” But how is this done? What is the relationship between the interpretation of the Bible and the context of the Church as well as Chinese culture? What is its relationship with the theological reconstruction in the Church? The key to exalting the Bible consists in how to interpret and treat it, that is, “treat the Bible with a serious attitude and promote a correct view of the Bible.”¹⁸

17 Chen Zemin, *Search and Witness: Selected Works of Chen Zemin*, Shanghai: CCC&TSPM, 2007, 56.

18 Cao Shengjie: “Ding Guangxun’s Anthology—Promoting Research on Self-propagation” in *Collection of Articles of the 10th Chinese Christian Assembly*, Shanghai: TSPM & CCC, 2019.

Therefore, “holding the Bible up high” is not equivalent to bookish biblicalism nor does it imply reading the Bible in isolation, ignoring and belittling the interpretative tradition of the ancient catholic church and even regarding biblical interpretation as the theological imagination of individuals. Theology cannot be divorced from the Bible and basic doctrines, which provide the reins to one’s own thoughts. All these are crucial for the preachers of grass-roots churches, teachers and students of seminaries in their involvement in the further contextualization of Christianity and the reconstruction of theological thought. Bishop K. H. Ting stresses that “the biblical view is very important as a master switch. If the biblical view is wrong, many incorrect ideas and negative thinking will arise.”¹⁹ As early as in the early 1990s, Bishop Ting had mentioned the limitations in the theological vision and scope of thinking of the Chinese Church in areas such as church institutions, biblical views, historical views, and ethical issues concerning international peace and social justice, women’s liberation, and environmental ethics; “we think very little or have blank minds on these issues.”²⁰ These assertions by Bishop Ting highlight the significance of the biblical view, and at the same time provide motive force and direction for research on this subject. Quoting the Bible within the context of Chinese society, Bishop Ting used the doctrines to expound on the truth that Christian faith is compatible with socialist society. He also interpreted political identity, cultural integration and social adaptation by using biblical teachings and Christian experience. The biblical view is the soul of specific interpretative acts and the spiritual practice of the Church. We should learn from historical experience, respect the spirit of faith traditions, hold high the biblical view and the theological interpretation of the Bible, as well as the approaches advocated in the reconstruction of theological

19 K. H. Ting, “Speech at the 50th Anniversary of Chinese Christian Three-Self Patriotic Movement”, *Nanjing Theological Review*, no. 4, 2000, 4.

20 K. H. Ting, “Preface to the Selected Works of *Nanjing Theological Review* (1952-1992),” Nanjing: Nanjing Union Theological Seminary, 1992, 2 .

thought, and endeavor to integrate the rigorous, historical study of interpretation with the spiritual needs of the churches so as to support the theological thinking of the Chinese Church. Our Bible consists of the New and Old Testaments. Bishop K. H. Ting once analyzed the shift and transformation of Christian theology in biblical interpretation in New China based on a study of the articles published in Nanjing Theological Review 《金陵神学志》 and Tianfeng Magazine 《天风》杂志: “Missionaries who come to China tend to be fundamentalist in their beliefs, so that evangelicals and fundamentalists have a great influence on Chinese churches today ... Chinese Christians’ understanding of the Bible is not static. The Chinese Church is now free from the shackles of western churches and is facing the new reality in China, which has pushed us to make adjustments in theological views. This has made a tremendous impact on how Chinese Christians treat the Bible.”²¹ This remark has in fact illustrated a significant shift in Christian theological hermeneutics in the New China. The Bible is important, and the interpretation of the Bible is even more important, however, with regard to Biblical hermeneutics, the theology of interpretation is the most essential of all. Next year (2021), the socialist society with Chinese characteristics in the new era will usher in one of two centennials: “the 100th anniversary of the founding of the Communist Party of China” and the major task of “building a moderately prosperous society in an all-round way” (全面建成小康社会), both of which will bring new opportunities and challenges to the Chinese Church. We must also continue to “make adjustments” and transformations in hermeneutic theology, focusing on the openness of biblical truth and the openness and publicity of the theology of interpretation, harmonizing the relations between doctrine and biblical interpretation and guiding the theological interpretation of the Chinese Church with socialist core values.

21 K. H. Ting, *On the Bible*, Shanghai: CCC&TSPM, 2000, 32 -33.

2. The transformation of theological interpretation in the new era

2.1. Pay attention to the openness of biblical truth

Textually speaking, the biblical canon is a closed book but it is also a book bearing the 'lively and vivid' Word of God. Hence, the truth of the Bible is open to churches of any age. We should not despise or blur God's real actions in specific time and space as recorded in the Bible neither should we take the western church as the center nor Platonism as the scalpel to reduce the complicated biblical world into the doctrines and dogmas of a certain local church or particular denomination. Instead, the recorded history of the Israelites and the early church should be regarded as a set of mirrors for looking at individual lives and church survival today. Biblical texts are unchanging but biblical views and theological interpretations of the Bible have undergone several regional and theological paradigm shifts in history, from the interpretations of early Christians to the Jews in Palestine, to those of the Roman Empire around the Mediterranean coast, to Carthage in North Africa, to Rome on the Apennine Peninsula, to Antioch on the east coast of the Mediterranean, and further afield to the Persian churches in the east; from the interpretation of Western European churches in the Middle Ages to the interpretation and theology of the local churches in the various ethnic-states of the Reformation, and so on. But the theme of God dominating human history and walking with humankind remains unchanged. The purpose of discussing these changes and transformations in the history of interpretation is to break down Western-centrism in Christian tradition and realize the further contextualization of theological thought and hermeneutical practice in China.²² Taking history as a mirror, Chinese Christians can begin with Chinese academic and cultural traditions as well as national interests, and proceed to apply Chinese national feelings and values to understanding the Bible so that the Bible's truth may "become flesh" in China.

The year 2019 marked the centenary of the publication of the Chinese Union Bible 中文和合本圣经. One hundred years of union and one hundred years of interpretation reflect the close relationship between the modern interpretation of the Bible in the Chinese Church and the changes that have taken place. Previous generations of patriotic Chinese Christian leaders have already begun the process of contextualization and further contextualization of biblical interpretation in China. As far as the Protestant churches in the New China are concerned, in the twentieth century, although Chinese churches and seminaries had different views on biblical criticism and various theories of scriptural interpretation, they generally upheld the principle of “seeking the common ground while reserving differences” in biblical views for the common goal of building up the Chinese church. Chinese churches no longer view theories such as “the Documentary Hypothesis” as a scourge, nor do they fall into the trap of believing in the inerrancy of the bible, or pay any attention to the “one-book doctrine” of the Bible, which is in essence “spiritual interpretation” or “allegorical interpretation” or “verbal inspiration” that contends it is sufficient to read the Bible without referring to the biblical commentaries. Generally speaking, after the founding of the People’s Republic of China, the interpretation route of Chinese churches, represented by the efforts of Mr. Wu Yaozong and Bishop K. H. Ting, has seen changes from the fundamentalist, eschatological and narrow view of theology brought by missionaries to one that is adaptive to socialist China and contributive to the unity of the Chinese churches, regardless of whether their former theological viewpoints were fundamentalist, modern or evangelical.

Most of the early missionaries who came to China held revivalist ideas. They brought with them conservative missionary ideas and biblical views to the Chinese Church, leaving at home the new perspectives and knowledge of the Bible and Gospel which had emerged in western churches and society during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

22 Gao Feng, “Building the Chinese Churches by Adhering to the Direction of Further Contextualization of Chinese Christianity,” *Nanjing Theological Review*, no.1 (1996): 9.

The truth is that they had no time to pass on the latest and enlightened Christian thoughts to the Chinese; at the same time, because of their conservative background, they did not accept these new achievements in biblical research produced in their own countries and did not use new biblical views in their missionary activities in China. Therefore, what Chinese Protestants received at the beginning was a relatively narrow and conservative view of the Bible. However, with the growth of the Chinese Church and the passage of time, some new views and interpretative methods of the Bible gradually influenced the Chinese Church, especially through the work of scholars such as Wu Yaozong, T. C. Chao 赵紫辰, Xie Fuya 谢扶雅, Li Rongfang 李荣芳, Tang Zhongmo 汤忠谟 who had studied in Europe and the United States or in the theological seminaries of mainline denominations. These devout Christian scholars all meant to apply the biblical and Christian truths to national cultivation and social transformation during that period. Naturally, there were also scholars with no overseas experiences, like Wu Leichuan 吴雷川, who shared similar ideas. Nevertheless, in modern times, the interpretative approaches of some missionaries have intensified the narrow-mindedness of theological interpretation in Chinese churches, and continue to have a great influence in grass-roots churches.²³ “Chinese churches, especially those at the grass-roots, are influenced by relatively conservative theological concepts and they one-sidedly emphasize the spirituality and transcendence of the Church. There are many examples in this regard. This concept will create many problems that will affect the Chinese church’s ability to effectually preach the gospel and establish a church that will bear effective witness in today’s context. This kind of ideology can be found in the Bible but it does not represent the complete gospel nor holistic biblical teachings. With this kind of ideology, Christians may ignore their social identities, roles, responsibilities and obligations as social individuals and citizens.”²⁴

23 This is based on field investigation among undergraduate and graduate students of the seminaries as well as the pulpit ministries of the grass-roots churches.

24 Gao Feng: “Introduction to the Church Order of Chinese Protestant Church”, *Nanjing Theological Review*, no. 3-4, 2014

Emphasizing the social responsibilities of Christians is the specific response to conservative and one-sided beliefs that emphasize personal salvation as opposed to caring for others or society. It also clarifies that Christians are both spiritual and social beings, are both citizens of God's kingdom and citizens of the state, and are both believers in the church and members of society. From this point of view, the contextualized theological interpretation of the Bible is also the most fundamental task in effectively resisting heresy. All heresies are distorted in regard to the publicity of theology. Early Christian heresies distorted Christology, misunderstood the relationship between God and humans, and held philosophical biases. In the history of the Church, Christology has often been a source of schisms, producing sects and heresies, and contributing to sectarianism in the Christian world. In addition, the common feature of heresies has been their fallacy in theological interpretation.

2.2. Pay attention to the publicity of TIB

The openness of TIB lays the theological basis for Biblical hermeneutics, while public theology in Chinese churches in the new era is the implementation and application of this theological underpinning. The basic content and task of theological interpretation goes beyond technical, textual interpretation of the Bible.²⁵ The purpose of theological interpretation is to build up the Church using scripture. The worldview, outlook on life and values revealed in the Bible have been accepted by a large number of people all over the world, and even imperceptibly regulate their social, economic and political life. This history and reality in itself shows the publicity and universality of the theology in the Bible and reflects the pursuit of human spiritual and secular life and the general law involved.

25 Kevin J. Vanhoozer (ed) *Dictionary for Theological Interpretation of the Bible* (MI: Baker Academic, 2005), 21.

The Bible itself is a theological interpretation of the world, especially in interpreting the sense of faith fellowship and individual survival. "Globalization forces theology to respond in time, because God is in globalization, and we can meet God in globalization and observe God's creation and redemption."²⁶ Standing and looking up at the sky, or going back to the chamber to pray, is to draw spiritual strength, and to trace the historical trajectory of the Incarnation, the Word (*Tao*) becoming flesh in the human world and to expand the living space of the Church in its context. Because the Christian religion is a kind of "culturally, morally, and service-oriented religion that reflects the ultimate concern of humankind", the Bible is not only an authoritative religious scripture that guides Christian belief and behavior, but is also an important product of human culture, that at the same time continues to exert an influence on human culture ...

Frederick Engels attached great importance to the study of the Bible in his explorations. Regarding the historical facts of early Christianity, he wrote three important papers based on biblical resources. In his book "The Peasant War in Germany," he described the division of the Church, in turmoil at that time, and studied how theological radicals represented by Thomas Müntzer explained the Bible in order to join in the mass struggle.²⁷

26 Max L. Stackhouse, "Public Theology and Political Economy in a Globalizing Era," in William E. Storrar and Andrew Morton (eds), *Public Theology for the 21st Century: Essays in Honor of Ducan B. Forrester*, London: Continuum, 2004, 179-180.

27 K. H. Ting., *On the Bible*, CCC&TSPM, Shanghai: 2000, 27-28.

That is to say, the Church must always identify with the progressive, peaceful, patriotic and just forces. This includes the theological interpretation of the Bible that agrees with the new socialist era in all aspects of history, politics, culture, and society, starting from the main theological themes of creationism, soteriology, doctrine of humanity, and ecclesiastical theory, and fully demonstrates the publicity of the theological interpretation of the Bible in the Chinese church in the new era. Although public theology has been criticized by some, it serves to remind the Chinese Church to heed the social context of socialism with Chinese characteristics in the new era, making the theology of interpretation refined politics. The paramount politics for the Chinese Church is to maintain its political identity with the Party and the state. Chinese churches are taking action: we pay attention to the social services of churches, ecological protection and the current Covid-19 pandemic.²⁸ Then, if we agree with or appreciate this way of interpreting the Bible, will we lose the identity of the Church and her “four natures,” and lose the identity of believers as the “people of heaven”?

This is not going to happen. This is in fact the important mission and goal of shaping the cultural identity of Chinese Christians in the new era. Take for example the theological interpretation of ecclesiastical discourse. We can explain it from the aspect of public theology and the openness of hermeneutics just as the Incarnation is declared in the Old Testament as “the Word (Tao) in the world” and in the New Testament as “the Word in human life” — which essentially have the same meaning – God’s tabernacle is on earth.

28 For example, Wu Jianrong et. al. : “Thinking under the epidemic”; Yan Weizhong: “Wisdom War Epidemic,” *Tianfeng*, no. 7, 2020; Zhang Peisheng and Li Xinnong: “Try to look at the problem of suffering from man’s creation—from the theology of suffering in Job,” *Nanjing Theological Review*, no. 2, 2020.

The Byzantine Church inherited the views of the early Greek church fathers, especially the views of the Church of Alexandria, which was not so much a theory of the sacredness of the Bible as it was a theology of the mysterious presence of the divine Word in the scriptures as well as the divine truth determining the whole motive force of biblical interpretation. At the same time, the Holy Spirit writes the scripture and regulates every detail of the scripture towards the goal of salvation.²⁹ This kind of “divine presence” is of great significance for considering the “four natures” of the Church in context, attaching importance to its participation in the world. The four attributes of the Church defined by the Nicene Creed and other confessions originating from the Bible are essentially theological interpretations of the Bible in the Greco-Roman cultural context. This is the tradition of the ancient catholic church by which the Chinese Church establishes herself. How are we to “create new ideas within the existing framework?” In fact, the Bible itself is a series of responses to the contexts of the biblical world. The first eleven chapters of Genesis record the origin of life, the origin of men and women, the origin of sin and falsehood, and the nature of the world after the fall ... This diversity in the Bible will not cause conflicts in our beliefs but rather will better reflect and convey the complexity of life ... Faith is trying to meet God, who is behind the Bible, and hence create meaning.³⁰

As far as the Chinese Church is concerned, it is implied that the Church should examine the meaning of the Word in the world in the new era, meet God in the new context, follow the example of the Incarnate Jesus Christ in the Bible, integrate into the real world and struggle with fellow citizens. In this dynamic process, the Church’s “four natures” no longer have the metaphysical speculative color of Greek philosophy but are like the ethical practice advocated by the Chinese Church today.

29 See Paul M. Blowers, “Eastern Orthodox Biblical Interpretation,” in Alan J. Hauser ed., *A History of Biblical Interpretation*, Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2009, 173.

30 Huang Houji, *Crossing Text: Bible, Life Situation and Theological Interpretation*, Hong Kong: Dehui Culture Book Co., Ltd., 2014, 135.

This is also consistent with the thinking of modern theologians such as the social gospel of Walter Rauschenbusch, the openness of theological anthropology of Wolfhart Pannenberg, David Tracy's religious pluralism and possibility of multiple interpretations and Kevin Vanhoozer's advocacy of being a responsible reader.³¹ That is to say, it is necessary to reflect the publicity of theological interpretation of the Bible in context and be a responsible interpreter, responsible not only to the faith tradition but also to the Bible, to the country as well as to the people. We should pay attention to the openness of the Church and the world of Christian thinking. On the basis of the successful experience of the older generation of Chinese churches, we should open our eyes to the new era of Socialism with Chinese characteristics and practice the openness and publicity of theology.

2.3. Contextualized Theology of Biblical Interpretation in the New Era: Integrating Theological Openness and Publicity in the Context

The openness of biblical truth determines the openness of biblical theological interpretation. In expounding the truth of the Bible, Bishop Ting has long pointed out the importance of the integration of soteriology and creationism, which is conducive to establishing the theological and cultural identity of the Chinese Church in a pluralistic society. However, the reality is that the basic work such as the translation and introduction of Christian classics, and the Chinese contextualized interpretation of faith and doctrines have yet to be effectively implemented. In some places, the promotion of contextualization has been mechanically and awkwardly reduced to restoring bygone ways, bordering on the vulgar.³²

31 See Kevin Vanhoozer, *Theological Hermeneutics*, Taipei: Campus Study Press, 2007.

32 See "the Plan." in *CTR No 29, 2018*.

In this respect, older generations of Chinese theologians and church leaders have set an example for today's churches. For example, the Life Society 生命社 in the 1920s emphasized the relationship between the identity of believers and the destiny of the country. The predecessor of Life Society was the Peking Apologetic Group, 北京证道团 which was established in 1920 and was composed of a group of Christian intellectuals such as Wu Leichuan. On the one hand, the group was dedicated to demonstrating how Christianity could adapt itself to the spirit of the times; on the other hand, it endeavored to reform the church in terms of its internal problems in areas such as the confession of the faith, organization, system and liturgy. They set up a journal: *Life Monthly* 《生命月刊》 which later merged with another journal and was renamed *Truth and Life* 《真理与生命》. At the beginning of 1921, T.C. Chao, Wu Leichuan and Wu Yaozong jointly published the article "Why should I read the Bible and how should I read it" 我为什么要读圣经, 用什么方法读圣经 in the sixth issue of the first volume of *Life Monthly*.

The starting point of T. C. Chao in reading the Bible was "to get life"; for Wu Leichuan, Bible reading was "for saving himself and others," while Wu Yaozong was motivated by "the noble personality of Christians and the admirable cause of Christianity." T. C. Chao claimed that the Bible is "the book of life, I read the Bible to get my life, and I want to benefit myself and save the nation from this life. I, who am an incapable boy, dare not give up reading."³³ T. C. Chao who had the experience of studying theology overseas was influenced by Friedrich Schleiermacher to see the Bible as a text of various religious experiences that evolved throughout history and, in the process, presented various religious experiences adapted to the current contexts, so T. C. Chao brought evolutionary theory into his theology and exegesis.

33 Liang Hui et al., "How Christians Read the Bible in Modern China," *Research on World Religions*, no. 3, 2005.

He used the “historical critical method” commonly employed in modern hermeneutics to read the Bible, and at the same time adopted the “Friend-making Methodology,” 尚友法 to spiritually interact with the sages, Jesus and God in the Bible. Overall, T.C. Chao tended to propagate the spiritual order of the Church which originates from the characteristics of the Christian social gospel that advocates transforming society through personal salvation.³⁴ For Wu Leichuan, he said: “Before I became a Christian, I read the Bible so that my faith might be established. After becoming a Christian, I know that Christians should not only improve their spiritual practice, but also pass on what they believe to others; If you don’t study the Bible, everything has no foundation. Therefore, in order to save myself and others, in the past five years, there has been no interruption in my efforts to read the Bible.”³⁵ His experience of reading and interpreting the Bible is typical of an old-style intellectual who believes in Christianity. He believed that the truth in the Bible can transform society and ameliorate people’s livelihood, and that the value of the Biblical message lies in its practice and social utility.³⁶

Wu Leichuan proceeded from the standpoint of nationalism and social practice to absorb and interpret the Bible, such as the dedication and devotion of Jesus which is in fact a response to the criticism of many Chinese that Protestantism had brought not only the doctrine and “gospel” but also violent insolence, exclusion and pain to the Chinese people in the past one hundred years. The “New Culture Movement” 新文化运动 and later on the “Anti-Christian Movement” 非基运动 were the intensive outbreaks of such sentiments.

34 Li Xiangping, *Sociological Research on the Sinicization of Christianity*, Beijing: Religious Culture Press, 2016. 69.

35 Liang Hui et al., “How Christians Read the Bible in Modern China”, *Research on World Religions*, no. 3, 2005 .

36 Ibid.

Wu Yaozong was greatly moved on reading Jesus' Sermon on the Mount. He felt that in Matthew Chapters 5, 6 and 7, "every word in the three chapters is authoritative and every word touches the very depth of my heart."³⁷ In the 1930s, he proclaimed the doctrine of love 惟爱主义. However, after seeing the cruel aggression of Japanese imperialism, he instead preached the "social gospel" and the war of resistance, arguing that "religion and life should never be separated" and believed that the Bible is of great help in building a just, peaceful and loving society. At the same time, among other factors, because of his studies overseas at a modern seminary, Wu Yaozong opposed the idea of "biblical inerrancy." He also had a favorable impression of materialism and communism; He surmised that since no one has ever seen God, only the good deeds of man before God can convince others that he himself is someone who believes in God.

Therefore, the older generations of theologians and church leaders attached great importance to the biblical passages concerning the relationship between faith and the world, church groups and society, that is, the passages reflecting "the Word in the world" and "the Word become flesh." They believed that the openness of the Church's theological interpretation of the Bible was the only way to establish the Church's identity, and maintain its survival and development. These thoughts also served as the theoretical forerunners of the further contextualization of Chinese Christianity today. "The church exists as a community. Only when the church exists for others can it be called a church ... It must participate in the social life of this world ... It must tell people from all walks of life what life is with Christ and what 'being for others' means, "The Church does not refer to a building, nor an organization; it refers to the relationship among people."³⁸

37 China Christian Three-Self Patriotic Movement Committee, ed, "Recalling Mr. Wu Yaozong", Shanghai: CCC&TSPM, 1982, 19.

38 Sera Terry, "Resurrecting Hope," in *The Boston Globe Magazine*, July 17, 1994. Quoted from Li Xiangping, 127.

3. The vision of Chinese contextualized theological interpretation of the Bible

3.1. The theological premise of the theological interpretation of the Bible

From the angle of hermeneutics, the Bible is not merely a treasure trove of Christian standards or doctrines at the epistemological level, but a treasure trove of God's grace, and a treasure trove of records about the way god's people survived. It is also the source and treasure trove of theological ideas witnessed by the early church in different contexts. At the core and soul of the further contextualization of Chinese Christianity is the further contextualization of theological thought. Only when theological thought is sinicized can Christianity, in its genuine sense, be further contextualized in China. Reinforcing biblical research, establishing a correct view of the bible and a hermeneutics in accord with the context will lay the foundation for the further reconstruction of theological thought. It is necessary to nurture biblical scholars in preparation for new Biblical translations or for compiling Bible commentaries. The vitality of the further contextualization of theological thought in China comes from the theological interpretation of the Bible. The Church Order of the Chinese Protestant Church (revised edition of 2018) clearly illustrates the Chinese Church's view of the Bible and the relationship between tradition and the Bible: "The Bible has been revealed by God and written down by human beings through the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. The Bible is the highest authority in matters of faith and is the standard for believers' lives. Through the leading of the Holy Spirit, people in different times and places all can gain new light from the Bible. The Bible should be interpreted in accordance with the principle of rightly interpreting the word of truth. It should not be interpreted arbitrarily or out of context. Anyone who holds personal authority above that of the Bible is wrong."³⁹

³⁹ The Church Order of the Chinese Protestant Church, 2018. See *Chinese Theological Review* vol 30, 2021, 3-4.

“Because of differences in culture, history and social context, churches throughout the world have developed diverse theological interpretations and faith practices.”⁴⁰

The Bible must always be the basis, whether it is in preaching the gospel, setting forth basic beliefs or in the formulation of theological thoughts and concepts; otherwise, any faith concept and theological thought will become untenable like “a stream without a source or a tree without roots.”

Therefore, with regard to the relationship between God and humans, we should stress the “createdness of the human” as the perspective from which to investigate biblical views and the history of biblical interpretation. Guided by Bishop Ting’s view that “God is love,” we should strive to bridge the rifts in the Chinese Church brought about by the clash of biblical views. Since “the Bible without theology is like a body without a soul, and a theology without the Bible is like a phantom floating in the wilderness,” what we want to change is the situation in which “the treasures of faith confessions are eliminated from biblical studies,” and “theological doctrines reject the contribution of biblical criticism.”⁴¹ We need to avoid “soulless” theological thinking and establish a stable foundation of biblical theology for deepening and refining the further contextualization of Christianity in China. Theological interpretation (that is, the understanding of the Bible) and the history of interpretation are two inseparable aspects of the same process. Theological interpretation guides the technical interpretation of the Bible and its application. Through the arguments offered in this article, we may recognize that there were many interpretations (of biblical passages) that are now considered ridiculous and even fallacious.

40 Ibid.

41 Baoling Sun, “Preface” in Daniel Treier: *Theological Hermeneutics of the Bible*, Hong Kong: Tiandao Bookstore, 2010, 7 .

Because of the theological thinking and ecclesiological views left by missionaries, it is worth noting that these hermeneutical fallacies and biases in the interpretation of the Bible continue to haunt the Church and society.

As mentioned above, the theology of biblical interpretation, or hermeneutical theology, no longer simply refers to exegetical techniques in the general sense but reflects certain interpretations by groups or individuals regarding the relationship between the gospel and society, reason and faith, spiritual life and knowledge, and between Christians and the world, which are concretely embodied in a sense of social responsibility, ethics and social engagement among Christian individuals or groups. Therefore, theological hermeneutics guides and regulates specific hermeneutic practice.

So, how do we determine the direction of biblical perspectives or theological hermeneutics? Faith traditions, the practical interests of groups and individuals, the worldviews and values of the interpreters, etc., all have a decisive influence on their biblical views; conversely, the specific interpretation of the Bible reflects the hermeneutical theology or biblical views of the interpreters. Therefore, we should not only observe how a theologian interprets the Bible but also explore why he or she interprets the Bible in such a way and observe how he or she puts theories or interpretations into practice. Such interaction between theological presuppositions and hermeneutics fulfills a proper hermeneutic cycle in hermeneutic discussions.

3.2. Promote the hermeneutic cycle of theological interpretation

In the history of biblical interpretation, the misunderstanding of philosophical preconceptions behind the theological interpretation of the Bible often leads to theological poverty and bigotry, leading to fierce debates that result in biased doctrinal, speculative views of scripture, radical biblicalism and views that prioritize personal spirituality, and tendencies toward radical allegorical and individualistic interpretation, exerting either a positive or negative influence on the Church, its adaptation to society and culture, and how believers bear witness to the biblical truth. Therefore, we should take history as a mirror, and carry forth the biblical view and interpretation path advocated by the reconstruction of theological thinking and the further contextualization of Chinese Christianity. We need to establish a holistic biblical view with a balanced and holistic understanding of the truths of both the New and Old Testaments, by avoiding the obliteration of the Old Testament, and the disregard for the intertestamental period or the detachment of the New Testament. We must oppose historical nihilism and ignorance of the hermeneutic tradition. We also need to preach about the balance between creation and redemption, the uniqueness of the truth revealed in each testament and the consistency of the truth in the whole Bible, the harmony between biblical studies and theological research as well as the integration of theological thinking with pastoral practice.

The above are related to various theoretical and practical concerns regarding how to view the Bible and its value. Why the Bible should be viewed this way, how to interpret the Bible and why it should be interpreted in such a way is a multifaceted question of theological theory and practice.

To elevate the Church's heritage to the same status as the Bible using ecclesiastical means will deprive lay believers of their right to read and interpret the Bible on their own. When we approach the Bible with simplified rationalism and scientism as the guiding ideology, the contents of the Bible will be treated as a historical source reflecting the religious thoughts of ancient Judaism and the early church. If we treat and interpret the Bible using allegorical exegesis based on mysticism and Platonic philosophy, our reading of the Bible will be constricted by the religious experiences and worldviews of its interpreters. Treating and interpreting the Bible using humanist philosophy leads people to interpret the Bible as a "common text," which opens the door to a modern interpretation of the Bible. When "Biblicism" is adopted, it is easy to put aside the specific conditions of time and space of God's revelation in the Bible, and thus interpret the Bible in isolation or even out of context. When it is declared that "the Bible is supreme" and biblical criticism is appropriately applied, we still need to raise the question of why "the Bible is supreme." Is the overall spiritual authority of the Bible supreme or is every word in the Bible supreme?

There are various viewpoints of the Bible in history, some of which have exerted a vital influence on different Christian denominations and groups to this day, resulting in differences in doctrinal emphases, pastoral practices and liturgy. These differences and disputes have even caused brutal religious wars in history. For example, the understanding of "the Fall" and "original sin," the infinite conjectures of "the Garden of Eden," understanding the Trinity, the divinity and humanity of Christ, the status of the Holy Spirit, the relationship between the Bible and church heritage, between the Bible and personal doctrine and religious experience, between the law and the gospel, and between the Bible and multiple cultures, all these and many other issues have caused dramatic upheavals in history.

No one may argue that any church father or theologian's works have the same spiritual quality as the books of the Bible or can be classified as "the second canon," something that is probably widely acknowledged. The view of the Bible, the recognition of the Bible's supreme authority, and hence how to interpret the Bible given this recognition, are critical for both individuals and church fellowships—theological interpretation is always ecclesiastical and communal.

Admittedly, there has been a disconnection between theology and the Bible in the history of Christian thought since ancient times. Theology that is not founded on biblical interpretation is not convincing nor enforceable. Without the norms and guidance of theological thinking and basic doctrines, the interpretation of the Bible is prone to deviation. So, what is the coordinating standard in keeping a balance between the two? It is the contextualized theological interpretation of the Bible. As far as today's Chinese churches are concerned, it is necessary to adhere to the basic doctrines and guide theological interpretation with socialist core values.

3.3. Guiding theological interpretation with socialist core values: several scriptural clusters as suggestions

General Secretary Xi Jinping points out that it is necessary to "adhere to the socialist core value system; cultural self-confidence is a more basic, deeper and lasting force in the development of a country and a nation. We must adhere to Marxism, firmly establish the lofty vision of communism and the common vision of socialism with Chinese characteristics, cultivate and practice socialist core values, continuously enhance our leading power and discourse power in the ideological field, promote the creative transformation and innovative development of excellent Chinese traditional culture, inherit revolutionary culture, develop advanced socialist culture, remember our origins, absorb the foreign, face the future, and build better the Chinese spirit, Chinese values and

Chinese power to provide spiritual guidance for the people.”⁴² Socialist core values embody the finest elements of Chinese culture and the broadest political wisdom of the Communist Party of China, in which prosperity, democracy, civilization and harmony are the goals at the national level; freedom, equality, justice and rule of law are the value orientations at the social level; and patriotism, dedication, honesty and friendliness are the value criteria at the level of individual citizens.

These values lead every citizen to fulfill his or her duties whether in their national roles, social roles or in personal cultivation. This is highly consistent with the ethical teaching and practice of the New and Old Testaments. In full response to the call of General Secretary Xi, The Plan states that to promote the further contextualization of Chinese Christianity, we must take the socialist core values as the guide and strengthen the “four consciousness” and the “four self-confidences” which should be implemented in the concrete work on theological thoughts, rules and regulations as well as in believers’ faith practice and daily lives, further stimulating the patriotic sentiment of pastors and believers to run the Church in accordance with the law. The Plan calls for deeper study of the Bible for what is compatible with socialist core values. It also sets out the plan to compile easy-to-understand reading materials for the grass-roots churches, pastoral staff and believers, to widely promote them, expand their influence within Christianity,.....and to support original work on biblical interpretation, spiritual formation and art that integrate Chinese church life, believers’ testimonies and social contexts as sources of inspiration, providing assistance in publishing and distribution.⁴³

42 Xi Jinping: “The Leadership of the Communist Party of China is the Most Essential Feature of Socialism with Chinese Characteristics,” *Qiushi*, no.14, 2020, July 2020.

43 See “The Plan”, *Chinese Theological Review* No. 29, 2018.

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, Bishop K. H. Ting identified four types of scriptural clusters that Chinese churches have paid more attention to in theological interpretation since the founding of the New China.⁴⁴ The contextualized interpretation of the bible in the new era and the transmission of its results can enable the application of the socialist core values by every Christian and every church. That is to say, the people around you do not delve into what you believe, but rather look at how you behave and how effective your faith has been. The conservative, closed and even retrogressive way of theological interpretation actually represents an escape from the Christian's social responsibility as a citizen. The only way for the church to develop in the new era is to demonstrate the publicity of theology and identify with the community of shared destiny of the Chinese nation. This has been attested to in the Bible. Then, more than thirty years later, in the context of socialism in the new era, what biblical materials must be theologically interpreted anew to help build the church, honor God and benefit the people? Based on data generated from fieldwork, I would like to try listing the following scriptural clusters to illustrate the direction of the theological thinking of the Chinese Church in the new era. These scriptural passages cover some of the most important scriptures in the New and Old Testaments that can be deeply analyzed theologically.⁴⁵

44 K. H. Ting, *On the Bible*, 41-48 .

45 Main sources of materials: *Tianfeng Magazine*, *Nanjing Theological Review*, *Chinese Theological Review* (English version), Textbooks, Pro-ceedings of the National and Local Christian Conferences, and term papers and graduation papers of undergraduate, postgraduate and doctoral students in theological colleges.

- 1) The scriptural clusters reflecting the adjustment and transformation of theological thought. “But seek the welfare of the city.” (Jer. 29:7) According to the situation in which the people are being tried by God, the Prophet Jeremiah promptly reminded them to adjust their theological thoughts and bear witness to the Lord of peace who brings peace to foreign lands. Biblical books such as 1 & 2 Chronicles, Ezra, and Nehemiah, which belong to the “Holy Anthology” (also known as “Historical Books”), direct people returning from exile to live by God’s Word and become a worshipping fellowship so that in this way, the fellowship of faith itself can be established. All these passages are conducive towards making adjustments in the theological thinking of the Church, thereby facilitating the spread of the Gospel.
- 2) Scriptural clusters reflecting patriotism and the progress of the times: More of these scriptures are listed here. For example, Chapter 40 of Isaiah praises Cyrus, King of Persia, as God’s anointed one (“Messiah” is translated as “Christ” in the New Testament.) There are also passages that mention obedience to those in power, and passages which speak about God-given wisdom and kindness among the Gentiles.
- 3) There are scriptural clusters reflecting the combination of creation and redemption, and regarding redemption as “new creation” and scriptural clusters related to ecological theology and honoring God’s creation, such as the vision of harmonious coexistence of all things in Chapter 11 of Isaiah. *Tianfeng Magazine* once published an interpretative paper which fully demonstrates Chinese Christians’ gratitude to God for his spiritual and earthly love and grace of creation.⁴⁶

46 For example, Jiang Yumin: “Analyzing the Relationship between Man and Nature from Song of Songs”, *Tianfeng*, no.9, 2005.

This article discards the allegorical interpretation of Song of Songs which has endured for 2,000 years in Western Christianity and propounds the theological thought of “Being in awe of God’s creation”: “In modern society, in order to develop science, technology and economy, human beings destroy the natural environment both advertently and inadvertently. Nature groans, and the earth has lost its ecological balance, which is leading toward the death of the cosmic ecosystem. Faced with environmental pollution and ecosystem destruction, the survival of human beings and the earth is at a critical juncture. Therefore, it is of great significance for us to reflect on the relationship between humans and nature. After rethinking the Word of God in the Bible, human beings need to reevaluate their position in nature, recognize their own identity and understand their responsibilities.”⁴⁷

General Secretary Xi Jinping points out: “Clear waters and green mountains are as valuable as gold and silver mountains.” This idea was written into the report of the 19th National Congress of the CPC Central Committee.⁴⁸

47 Ibid.

48 “Clear waters and green mountains are gold and silver mountains” is a scientific assertion put forward by Xi Jinping, then secretary of Zhejiang Provincial Party Committee, during his inspection in Anji, Huzhou, Zhejiang Province on August 15, 2005. It is the main theory guiding China’s ecological civilization construction, providing theoretical support for China’s move towards an ecological market economy, opening up new space and providing new ideas for China’s supply-side structural reform, and providing a new solution for realizing the urbanization model with Chinese characteristics of urban-rural dual civilization symbiosis and balanced development between urban and rural areas. On October 18th, 2017, this theory was written into the report of the 19th National Congress of the Communist Party of China. Comrade Xi Jinping’s important thought of “two mountains” fully embodies the dialectical viewpoint of Marxism, systematically analyzes the relationship between economy and ecology in the evolution process, and profoundly reveals the basic laws of economic and social development.

Christians and non-Christians under the same blue sky of the motherland are both called by God, who appoints those who are meant to be appointed and respects those who are worthy of respect, and encourages humans to co-create, “庸庸 祗祗, 上帝引逸。”⁴⁹ God also helps humans overcome hardships or suffering, “艰难困苦, 玉汝于成。”

- 4) Scriptural clusters regarding establishing a harmonious society, a harmonious church, and encouraging believers to keep their promises and abide by the law: There are many such scriptures and a few are listed here: “the Song of Songs” in 1 Corinthians Chapter 13; the exploration of the doctrine of “rest” in the Bible (especially the related scriptures in Genesis, Exodus and Leviticus) and its application in modern economic society; scriptural verses applicable to the discussion on the relationship between Church and modern socio-economic life (relations of faith and wealth); scriptural verses that encourage those with faith in God to serve the people in a priestly spirit; wisdom literature (including Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Job, Psalms, Song of Songs and James) that reflect the wisdom and love of believers in the “secular” world, including the fear of God in the midst of abrupt changes and confusion of life; scriptures related to the administration of faith fellowships and the construction of church institutions in the Bible; scriptures for the self-care and tending of pastors; verses that attach importance to church festivals and the lectionary; passages that reflect filial piety, care for the poor and vulnerable groups; and biblical passages that provide guidance in the healing of social contradictions in modern society.

49 See Kang Gao of the Book of Songs 《诗经•康诰》, <https://www.slkj.org/c/5789.html>.

The theological interpretation of these scriptural clusters is based on a holistic biblical view and the idea of “Letting the whole Bible speak.” At the same time, in response to the new contexts and new challenges encountered by the Chinese Church in the twenty-first century, it recognizes and practices the socialist core values in thought and action, and responds to the new requirements of the Party and the government, especially the goal of the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation. It also reflects the theological shift in the Chinese Church’s biblical interpretation in the new era. It shows that in the twenty-first century, Chinese Christians’ theological vision of biblical interpretation has become broader, and is no longer limited to individual passages of the New Testament nor is it keen on the “spiritual interpretation” of the Old Testament such as esoteric word plays or biblicistic interpretation, but extends theological vision to the whole Bible and the overall complexity of church life:

In employing the theological interpretation of the Bible, while inheriting the legacy of the ancient catholic church, we have consciously adjusted our theological interpretation to keep up with the times and the changing contexts.

We will also pay attention to the role and political responsibilities of the Church in the new era of socialism with Chinese characteristics.

We will endeavor to perfect the construction of the church system in accordance with the Bible and establish the Chinese Church’s own ecclesiology.

Based on the achievements of our own hermeneutical efforts, we will expand the publicity and horizon of Chinese theology, using theological hermeneutics that reflect the concerns of the time to interpret the complexity of modern economic and commercialized social life, and derive the unique gospel messages that the Church can share with compatriots.

We hope that under the guidance of the reconstruction of theological thinking and the further contextualization of Chinese Christianity, there will be more scriptural clusters worth exploring and developing.

4. Conclusion

Both the history of the Christian Church and Christian theological thought reveal that Biblical interpretation and hermeneutics are the products of contextualized responses. In turn, the results of the theological interpretation of the Bible guide the spiritual and social practices of the Church. The openness and pluralism of biblical truth testify to the vitality and richness of God's Word, which is the spiritual foundation for the theological interpretation of the Bible of the Chinese Church in the new era. Guiding the interpretation with socialist core values is the basic project of further contextualization. On this basis, the theological thinking of the Chinese Church will depend on Biblical truth, draw from the living spring of the Holy Spirit and revitalize the spiritual tradition of the Chinese Church so as to shape her theological selfhood in the doctrines concerning God, church, the Holy Spirit, Christ,

creation and redemption.

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