



# A Theology of Lament for the Immigrant Community

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**Abstract** “A Theology of Lament for the Immigrant Community” provides insightful theological reflections in the form of a Lamentation on how HANA churches, as communities of faith, theologize their collective identity and their shared experiences.

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## INTRODUCTION

In the fall of 2011, I was returning from a year-long sabbatical. My first day back at the office, I spent the entire morning opening and tossing out accumulated junk mail. There was one particular item that caught my eye. It was a nicely packaged DVD from a U.S.-based NGO with the words, “The poor will not always be with us” emblazoned on the cover. As a seminary professor and former pastor, I am always intrigued when Scripture is twisted to meet the needs of the communicator, so I opened the package to examine the contents.

The intent of this material was to challenge the church, specifically the church in the United States, to end extreme poverty within this generation—a noble and worthwhile effort I support. However, the more subliminal message was that the U.S. church was responsible for fixing the problem by using American gumption, ingenuity, and know-how. The DVD material exemplifies the American church’s self-perception of privilege. Our standing as the saviors of the world is assumed and not challenged. This type of exceptionalism and triumphalism conflicts with the biblical call for humility as evidenced by lament. The practice of lament in the Bible confronts our American Christian assumptions.

The narrative of exceptionalism is embedded in the American dream, which has been embraced by many in the Asian American community. The Asian American community is often portrayed as the model minority and elevated by the dominant culture as the example to follow. “If the Asians could pull themselves up by the bootstraps, why can’t other ethnic groups?” TV talk show host Bill O’Reilly reflects this ignorance in his comments as the controversy surrounding the shooting of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri, unfolded. In challenging the reality of white privilege, O’Reilly invoked the tired adage of the Asian as the model minority.

[T]he Asian American community is not a troubled situation, as everybody knows, their academics are better than whites, okay. They have language to overcome. While black Americans don’t. It all comes down to families, culture, personal responsibility, all of these things, which we don’t hear anything or much about.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> “Watch Bill O’Reilly And Megyn Kelly Spar Over The Existence Of White Privilege,” Media Matters for America, last accessed November 11, 2014, <http://mediamatters.org/video/2014/08/25/watch-foxs-megyn-kelly-educate-bill-oreilly-on/200545>.

O'Reilly manipulates the Asian American narrative in the context of the American dream to further oppress another minority group. The elevation of part of the Asian American story reveals the desire by the dominant culture to assert the possibility of attaining the American dream. In turn, the Asian American community has willingly embraced this narrative.

In contrast, the Hispanic American community has often been left out of the dominant narrative of the American dream. In the example of immigration laws, there has been an actual deliberate exclusion of the Hispanic American community. (Historically, there has also been the exclusion of Asian Americans with laws like the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882. However, in recent years, Asian immigration, particularly East Asian and South Asian immigration, has been more welcomed in the United States.) In regards to educational and economic opportunity, the current expression of the American narrative often places Hispanic Americans outside of these opportunities.

Both communities, therefore, have had a dysfunctional relationship with the dominant narrative of triumphalism and exceptionalism in American society. Immigrant churches are particularly to the narratives of dominant culture. Biblical lament calls for honesty and truth-telling about the broken state of society and the individual. As such, the excessive triumphalism of American society has nearly quashed a practice as countercultural as lament.

In *Hurting with God*, Glenn Pemberton notes that lament constitutes 40 percent of all psalms, but in the hymnal for the Churches of Christ, laments make up 13 percent, the Presbyterian hymnal 19 percent, and the Baptist hymnal 13 percent.<sup>2</sup> Christian Copyright Licensing International (CCLI) licenses and tracks church usage of contemporary worship songs. CCLI's list of the top 100 worship songs in August of 2012 reveals that only five of the songs would even remotely qualify as a lament.<sup>3</sup> Most of the songs reflect themes of praise: "How Great is Our God," "Here I Am to Worship," "Happy Day," "Friend of God," "Glorious Day," and "Victory in Jesus."

Majority culture's infatuation with success narratives and the American church's avoidance of lament results in a severe deficiency in our ecclesiology and the loss of the underlying narrative of suffering. We forget the reality of suffering and pain. For immigrant communities, our stories of suffering may be shameful reminders of a history we would rather forget. Instead of offering up an essential ingredient necessary for a robust North American theology, the Hispanic and Asian North American communities may distance themselves from the important practice of lament.

The fullness of the story of God's work requires a remembering of suffering and a willingness to enter into lament. Lament calls for an authentic encounter with the fullness of truth. The triumphalistic tendency of American evangelicalism cries out for the introduction of lament from immigrant communities. An alternative narrative is required to stretch the theological imagination of a Christianity that has too deeply drunk from a cultural captivity to triumphalism.

## **SUFFERING, CELEBRATION, AND THE NEED FOR LAMENT**

The cultural captivity of American Christianity to the narrative of exceptionalism and triumphalism presents a challenge to the immigrant narrative and theological ethic of the Hispanic and Asian North American (HANA) churches. Both these Christian communities, however, have an evangelical value of a high view of Scripture. The common ground that shapes both communities is that they recognize the Bible as a central authority. Theological and ethical engagement therefore, must arise out of biblical reflection. Lament theology, as it emerges from our study of Scripture, presents an important contrast to

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<sup>2</sup> Glenn Pemberton, *Hurting with God: Learning to Lament with the Psalms* (Abilene, TX: Abilene Christian University Press: June 10, 2012), Kindle locations 441–445, Kindle edition.

<sup>3</sup> "CCLI Top 100," PraiseCharts, accessed August 2012, <http://www.praisecharts.com/ccli-top-100>.

the narrative of American exceptionalism. Lament presents an opportunity for the unique context and experience of the immigrant community to contribute to the larger American evangelical theological narrative. The marginalized and suffering immigrant community can teach and serve the dominant culture.

Walter Brueggemann writes about the contrast between a theology of the “have-nots” versus a theology of the “haves.” The “have-nots” develop a theology of suffering and survival. The “haves” develop a theology of celebration. Those who live under suffering live “their lives aware of the acute precariousness of their situation.” Worship that arises out of suffering cries out for deliverance. “Their notion of themselves is that of a dependent people crying out for a vision of survival and salvation.” Lament marks the story of suffering.<sup>4</sup> Those who live in celebration “are concerned with questions of proper management and joyous celebration.” Instead of deliverance, they seek constancy and sustainability. “The well-off do not expect their faith to begin in a cry but rather, in a song. They do not expect or need intrusion, but they rejoice in stability.” Praise marks the story of celebration.<sup>5</sup>

Praise seeks to maintain the status quo, while lament cries out against existing injustices. Christian communities arising from celebration do not want their lives changed, because their lives are in a good place. Tax rates should remain low. Home prices and stocks should continue to rise unabated, while interest rates should remain low so more money can be borrowed to feed a lifestyle to which we have become accustomed.

Lament recognizes the struggles of life. The status quo is not to be celebrated but instead must be challenged. Tax rates should not favor the rich, but instead hope should be offered to the least in our society. Redistribution of wealth would not be a catastrophe, but instead, a blessing. Lament challenges the status quo of injustice.

American Christians that flourish under the existing system seek to maintain the status quo and remain in the theology of celebration over and against the theology of suffering. To only have a theology of celebration at the cost of a theology of suffering is incomplete. The intersection of the two threads provides the opportunity to engage in the fullness of the gospel message. Lament and praise must go hand in hand.

Walter Brueggemann asks the question:

“What happens when appreciation of the lament as a form of speech and faith is lost, as I think it is largely lost in contemporary usage? What happens when the speech forms that redress power distribution have been silenced and eliminated? The answer, I believe, is that a theological monopoly is reinforced, docility and submissiveness are engendered, and the outcome in terms of social practice is to reinforce and consolidate the political-economic monopoly of the status quo.”<sup>6</sup>

According to Brueggemann, the dominant culture seeks to maintain existing power structures—insuring the ongoing cultural captivity of the American evangelical church. Toward that end, lament must be suppressed by the dominant culture.

For American evangelicals riding the fumes of a previous generation’s Christendom assumptions, a triumphalistic theology of celebration and privilege rooted in a praise-only narrative is perpetuated by the absence of lament and the underlying narrative of suffering that informs lament. The suffering narrative is

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<sup>4</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *Peace* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2001), 26–28.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 28–32.

<sup>6</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *Psalms and the Life of Faith* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1995), 102, Kindle edition.

considered inferior and should be ignored or removed from the dominant narrative of success. Stories of successful church plants and growing megachurches with huge budgets are front and center in how we tell the story of American Christianity. Conferences must bring in big name speakers—usually young, hip, white pastors who meet the ideal of a typical American success story as entrepreneurs and “thought leaders.”

These trends further perpetuate the triumphalistic narrative of white American evangelicalism. Other forms of Christianity can be portrayed as inferior to the successful formula for ministry put forth by white evangelicals. A narrative of success propels white evangelicalism over and above other expressions of Christianity like the Hispanic American and Asian American Christian communities. These tendencies may explain the dominant culture’s embrace of the model minority myth caricature of the Asian American story and the disposable labor narrative of the Hispanic American community.

For the complete biblical narrative to take root in our community, lament has to become a part of our story. Praise and lament must intersect. Lament calls us to examine the work of reconciliation between those who live under suffering with those who live in celebration. Lament challenges our celebratory assumptions with the reality of suffering. The very real struggles experienced by the HANA communities should not be swept under the rug, but instead embraced as an important aspect of the gospel that is emerging in the next evangelicalism.

## THE HOPE OF LAMENT

The book of Lamentations offers an example of the application of lament in our contemporary context. The book arises from the destruction of Jerusalem and the exile of its residents. The community responds to this tragedy with lament. Lamentations reveals that our suffering is not in isolation, but experienced as a community. As the body of Christ, suffering in one part of the body means suffering exists in the entire body. Communal lament calls the ones living under the blessings of celebration to engage with those living under the pain of suffering. Our understanding of the gospel is incomplete if both suffering and celebration are not embraced. The stories of suffering that arise out of the immigrant experience reflect an essential narrative for the fullness of the American Christian story. The immigrant church offers an important balance to the dominant narrative.

Lamentations offers both communal and individual laments to reveal the breadth of suffering. The communal experience is affirmed by individual laments. Individual laments are not spoken in isolation, separate from each other. F. W. Dobbs-Allsopp notes a reason for the range of individual voices in Lamentations. “These very concrete and specific instances of suffering have been intentionally gathered together, each strung, as it were, like individual pearls on a necklace...ensur[ing] that they mean [something] cumulatively as well as individually.”<sup>7</sup> The individual laments in Lamentations points to the communal grieving experienced by the entire community.

A central characteristic of the book of Lamentations is the employing of a myriad of voices. While seemingly reflecting the perspective of Jeremiah, the text draws from the spectrum of Jerusalem’s residents to reflect the full story of Jerusalem’s fall. As Adele Berlin notes: “In order to show how far-reaching the suffering was, the poet refers to its effect on various elements of the population, for example, young and old, priest and prophet, women and children.”<sup>8</sup> In other words, the fullness of the biblical testimony requires a variety of voices.

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<sup>7</sup> F. W. Dobbs-Allsopp, *Lamentations in Interpretation* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 2002), 41.

<sup>8</sup> Adele Berlin, *Lamentations in The Old Testament Library* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2004), 13.

Furthermore, much of the suffering in Lamentations reflects a woman's voice. Jerusalem is personified as a woman who has experienced tremendous suffering and pain. Kathleen O'Connor states that "the poetry focuses on her (Zion's) female roles—widow, mother, lover, and rape victim.... By making Jerusalem a woman, the poetry gives her personality and human characteristics that evoke pity or disdain from readers."<sup>9</sup> Lamentations may prove to be the most important book of the Bible with a feminine voice. In the face of tremendous suffering, the voices of women rise up to express the depth of sorrow experienced by the community. The voices of suffering women can offset the triumphalistic tendencies of American Christianity.

In recent years, the attempt to silence the voices of women in the church has resulted in a severe loss for the church. Dominant male voices have dictated the rules of behavior for evangelical leadership. The dominant ethos of evangelicalism has reflected this overwhelmingly male perspective. The evangelical use of silly terms like "muscular Christianity" reveals a masculine insecurity. The desire to associate evangelical Christianity with a culturally warped form of masculinity reveals a culturally captive Christianity rather than a biblical one.

The book of Lamentations gives us a clear example of the necessity of the woman's voice to speak from among God's people. I am not attempting to deal with the New Testament application of the role of women in the church. But clearly in the book of Lamentations, women's voices stand front and center. Lamentations does not survive without the female voice. By silencing women's voices, we project our inadequacy upon our understanding of the biblical message. We gravitate toward the silly triumphalistic tendencies of an unfettered masculinity without the necessary balance of alternative narratives found in the Bible.

The expression of suffering through the genre of lament does not imply hopelessness. While Lamentations does not end with a happy resolution, the possibility of hope remains. The presence of lament actually gestures toward the presence of hope. To lament before God is to petition the Almighty. Hope is built into the practice of lament. Lament breaks the narrative of an oppressive triumphalism. In the same way, our presence as the HANA Christian community in the context of American evangelicalism may actually represent hope to a culturally captive Christianity.

The very real suffering of God's people is presented in Lamentations in vivid, even gory details for the world to hear. But in the process of expressing that suffering, hope is offered. Recognizing suffering is an affirmation that God is still there and still concerned with His people. Even if the explicit promise is not offered, the freedom to voice despair portends hope. "Lamentations' very bleakness expresses fidelity. Its bitter accusations reveal profound yearning for God.... It voices truth without which relationships cannot prosper."<sup>10</sup> The hope is in the relationship. Not merely words spoken or promises made, but that God offers reconciliation to even His most bitter enemies. The hope of reconciliation rests in a relationship with God.

Hope is not found in the human ability to come up with the solutions. Hope is found in the steadfast character of God. Lamentations 3 reminds God's people that the steadfast love of the LORD never ceases and that His mercies never come to an end. Despite the suffering expressed throughout the book of Lamentations, the character of God remains unchanged. The confirmation of God's character leads to the possibility of appealing to God. Equipped with a deep belief and faith in YHWH, the voice of Jeremiah moves towards a corporate confession. "Let us examine our ways and test them...Let us return to the LORD" (Lam. 3:40), "Let us lift up our hearts and our hands to God in heaven and say: We have sinned and rebelled" (Lam. 3:41, 42). The beginnings of spiritual renewal emerge as God's people engage in a

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<sup>9</sup> Kathleen O'Connor, *Lamentations and the Tears of the World* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2002) 14.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 125.

corporate confession of sin. A sincere repentance moves the community toward a changed and renewed life.

The communal lament offers the possibility of moving from suffering to celebration. The petition of lament has the very real promise of becoming a psalm of praise. Claus Westermann notes that “the beginnings and transitions to praise of God are seen even in the laments of the people and of the individual.”<sup>11</sup> Lament leads to petition which leads to praise for God’s response to the petition. Brueggemann summarizes that “the intervention of God in some way permits the move from plea to praise [and]...the proper setting of praise is as lament resolved.”<sup>12</sup> Praise follows lament. However, in a cultural context that upholds triumph and victory but fails to engage with suffering, praise replaces lament. We thus skip the important step of lament and offer supplication in a contextual vacuum.

The absence of an immediate promise of restoration should not be taken as a lack of hope. The power of the lament is the ability to sustain a deeply troubled narrative. Implicit in the privilege of expressing that suffering lies the hope that the speaking of that suffering is not in vain. In a triumphalistic world, Lamentations makes no sense. The theology of celebration will always be more attractive than the theology of suffering. But if lament were offered to a suffering world, the hope that is weaved into lament will lighten our darkness and offer the possibility of genuine reconciliation.

## CONCLUSION

Several years ago, one of my friends who was working on a documentary on immigration, asked if he could film parts of my family’s story. My friend wanted to return to the neighborhood where I grew up. When I was in elementary school, with our dad’s exit from our family, my family moved to an inner-city neighborhood in Baltimore. The neighborhood was comprised of poor blacks, poor whites, and recent Korean immigrants. My friend and I drove around the neighborhood and the low-income apartment complex that was still standing. We shot some stock footage around my old apartment building. At the end of the day, we visited my mom who now lived in a senior resident building to interview her about her experience as an immigrant.

My mom had suffered much as an immigrant to the United States. She had followed her husband with four kids in tow to come to this foreign country. She had come to pursue the American dream, but when her husband abandoned her, she did everything in her power to prevent the dream from becoming a nightmare. Her resolve and commitment kept her family together and in many ways we were able to achieve aspects of the American dream. But there were certainly parts of the story that were nightmarish.

As a single mom with limited language skills, she worked long hours at two different jobs. During the day, she would work at a Baltimore inner-city carryout—frying chicken, making steak subs and fish sandwiches. She would work a twelve-hour shift until right before 11 p.m. From that job, she would head over to work the graveyard shift at an inner city nursing home as a nurse’s aide. She would change the bedpans and keep watch through the night at the nursing home. She would return home in time to wake up her children, make us breakfast and catch a short nap before returning to work at the carryout.

I was looking forward to the on-camera interview with my mom. Memories from childhood are always fragmented and I hoped to fill out aspects of my childhood. The actual interview, however, proved to be extraordinarily frustrating. The cameras and lights were all set up perfectly. My friend knew how to stage my mom’s senior citizen apartment in an artistic way. My mom, however, was not very forthcoming. I was serving as the interviewer. I would ask her to describe her experience of raising four kids in an inner-city

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<sup>11</sup> Claus Westermann, *Praise and Lament in the Psalms* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1981), 155.

<sup>12</sup> Brueggemann, *Psalms*, Kindle edition, 1151 and 1158 of 4119.

neighborhood as a single mom. I would ask her to talk about what it was like to work impossibly long hours. I asked her to talk about her experiences of suffering.

Each time I would raise a question about a hardship experience, she would deflect with effusive comments about how thankful she was that her children were doing well. That whatever happened, had happened a long time ago and that what was more important was how thankful she was that her children were doing well.

After about two hours of this fruitless exchange, my friend and I left my mom's senior citizen's apartment and got into my car. There was a strange silence. As we drove away, I remarked to my friend, "I'm not sure what happened. I'm really surprised at how unwilling she was to talk about our experience. It's almost like she's forgotten about all of the hardships we went through as a family. She seemed to ignore our whole family story."

The fruitless interview with my mom reminded me that immigrants don't often have the opportunity to share their stories. And in my mom's case, for some reason, she was unwilling to share her story. Maybe the pain was too great, maybe she wanted to keep things bottled up like she had for so many years, maybe she really had forgotten all of the details, or maybe she was just used to nobody listening or caring about her story. But I realized that often stories of struggle like my mom's story have a great deal of difficulty being told in the triumphalistic modern context of American Christianity.

A few years ago, my mom, now in her eighties, was diagnosed with the early stages of dementia. As of this writing, a woman who has always been one of the sharpest-witted women I know, is responding at an increasingly slow rate. The memories of her struggles and the stories of her journey are in danger of being lost and remaining untold.

My deep disappointment in American evangelicalism is that stories like hers are deemed less worthy than the stories of the latest evangelical superstar with a megachurch. We love to hear from the hotshot pastor with the hip haircut, tattoos, cool glasses and Ed Hardy shirts. We worship at the altar of the latest and greatest American evangelical icon, who regales us with stories of the exploits of their cutting-edge ministry. Our ears have been tuned to hear the call for successful pastors who will go and conquer the world with a muscular Christianity. Meanwhile, we ignore the stories of suffering and oppression (oftentimes the voices of women oppressed by their own communities). We have a deficient theology that trumpets the triumphalistic successes of evangelicalism while failing to hear from the stories of suffering that often tell us more about who we are as a community. This deficiency is to our great loss as a Christian community.

A theology of lament challenges the Hispanic and Asian North American communities to contribute to the larger stream of American Christianity. The immigrant stories of hardship and struggle, oftentimes reflected in the stories of women, must be heard. A theology of lament recognizes that God is at work not only in the success stories of Christians who have attained the American dream but in the stories of immigrants and their progeny whose struggles reveal the full breadth of the Christian story.

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