

Toward Diaconate Ecclesiology (Contributions of the Reformation to Asian Churches Today)

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Abstract

The background of this research came from Niassans' Ethnic Church which struggle for defining their own identity between the root and Christian missionaries' culture. Until now, the church and Niassans are still influenced by this kind of thought, placing the church and Christians in Nias far away from its own cultural root. Before Christianity came on Nias, in many village there was a small sacred place called *Osali*, where the ancestral spirits dwelt and a multitude of *Adu* were kept. In the second church order (1955), the meaning of *osali* was modified. Henceforth, *osali* was used for 'church building' as well as 'fellowship of the believers'. This modification influences the understanding of people about the church. It is very important to reflect on the existing and developing ecclesiology in Nias, Indonesia, and Asia. It is very important to reflect again on the Priesthood of All Believers and Diaconia

KEYWORDS : Niassans' Ethnic Church, Christian, Diaconate Ecclesiology

1. I come from the church that is usually called as "Ethnic Church," because it is based on one ethnic (Nias ethnic). My church has been always in struggle to define its own identity as Christians and at the same time Niassans. The struggle for defining our own identity is rooted in the missionaries attitude and teaching that insisted to be a Christian is to leave behind our old way of living, including all traditions and cultures. These new Christians then are brought to the new culture, the culture of missionaries that is considered higher and more civilized than the local culture. The culture of missionaries that actually is Western/European culture is considered as Christian culture. Existing theology and worldview of the missionaries views local culture as low and evil, thus in support of banishing local culture. Until now, the church and Niassans are still influenced by this kind of thought, placing the church and Christians in Nias far away from its own cultural root. This situation is deepened by the dualistic theology and worldview. There is separation between what is spiritual life and daily life. The life of the church or to be a Christian is only associated with the life and activities around Sunday Worship. While their way of living from Monday-Saturday is not connected with the Christian values. Dualistic Christianity views repentance as individual concern and it has nothing to do with social problems. As an example, somebody can be a pious and active Christian (become liturgist, singer, church council member, etc.), but in his office or in his work, he can become a very cruel leader who oppress his employers, or a businessman who have no concern for the welfare of his workers, a company owner who destroyed environments, or a corrupt staff. Aside from that, the church becomes very detach from daily problems, such as poverty, injustice, violence, social problems, economic and politic problem, etc. On the other side, the church is understood as a

place to gain status and glory. So, the churches are competing to build church buildings amidst poverty, and competing to be church leader for the sake of status or position.

2. To understand the situation mentioned above, I would like to focus on the ecclesiology, that is existing and living in Nias church. In Nias language, the term “church” is called OSALI. This term is taken from Nias primal religion terminology. Before Christianity came on Nias, in many village there was a small sacred place called *Osali*, where the ancestral spirits dwelt and a multitude of *Adu*¹ were kept. The traditional house is usually characterized by walls which have engravings reflecting the cosmology, the upper and lower worlds, and illustrating unity and wholeness.² This reflection of the cosmology and illustration of wholeness was highlighted by the presence of an *Osali* or *bale* in each village. In the northern, central, eastern and western parts of Nias, *Osali* designate different things. The *osali* was a meeting place to discuss all things related to community affairs, whereas the *osali nadu* was the place to keep the *adu* as well as the severed heads of people who had been captured during a war. The *osali nadu* also had the function of being a place to worship the *adu*. It was here that *fondrakö* (laws) was discussed and resolved.³ In general, *osali* or *bale* in South Nias means a place for gathering, a place for religious rituals⁴, a speaking corner⁵, a place for palaver to discuss issues related to *böwö* (dowry *adat*) and all other important events during the entire cycle of life of the Ono Niha. In South Nias, the *Osali* or *bale* also functioned as a place to discuss matters concerning the division of responsibilities, the security system, law suites, etc. In all these activities, *ere* played a central role as the mediators between human beings and the ancestral spirits. Their rituals had to maintain the harmony of the cosmos.⁶

The term *Osali* was chosen by the missionaries for ‘church’: the institution, the fellowship of the believers, and the place of worship, without *ADU*. The missionaries also initially used the expression *satua gosali* for the elders⁷, but later changed this to *satua Niha Keriso*. The word *osali* was patented in the first church order (1936) as the expression for the ‘local congregation’.⁸ The fellowship of all the *osali* was called *Banua Niha Keriso Protestant* (BNKP). In the second church order (1955)⁹, however, the meaning of *osali* was modified. Henceforth, *osali* was

¹ Image (idol), usually from wood or stone, used to call upon the spirits in ceremonies; the *adu* symbolises the primal religion of the Ono Niha

² P. Suzuki, *The Religious System and Culture of Nias, Indonesia*, 1959, pp. 65-77.

³ E.E.W.Gs. Schröder, *Nias*, 1917, pp. 118-122.

⁴ Cf. Ch. 2.6.2.3. Cf. Interview with Ama Wiliba Sadawa on 15 February 2004 in Gomo. Cf. J.M. Hämmerle, *Omo Sebua*, 1990, p. 163-165. In the *bale*, there were two statues; *Adu ndra Ama* and *Lawolo ndra Ama*. This was to show the relationship with the ancestors. Both statues stand for the founder of the village. Aside from a statue, there was a skull as an offering. Another statue could be found in the front of the *bale* which was devoted to *Lowalangi*, the upper and back parts were devoted to *Latura Danö*, the god of the underworld.

⁵ J.W. Thomas and E.A. Taylor Weber, *Niasch-Maleisch-Nederlandsch Woordenboek*, 1887, p. 155. They translate *osali* as a place to talk or to discuss things (*Gemeentehuis*).

⁶ Cf. Ch. 2.4.2.1, 2.4.2.2. Cf. P. Suzuki, *The Religious System and Culture of Nias, Indonesia*, 1959, p. 52-53.

⁷ Cf. W. Gulö, *Benih yang Tumbuh XIII*, 1983, p. 222.

⁸ Cf. Anonymous, *Lala Nihohogöi*, 1938, pp. 4-5.

⁹ Cf. W. Gulö, *Benih yang Tumbuh XIII*, 1983, p. 255.

used for ‘church building’ as well as ‘fellowship of the believers’. This modification influences the understanding of people about the church:

- (1) *Firstly*, since missionaries came, the understanding of the church is limited only to the building and uprooted from its original meaning in Niassan culture. Now, congregation always strive to build huge church building with tower, and there is no intention to simplify it or to pattern it after the model of “osali,” of the primal religion.
- (2) *Secondly*, every *banua* or *öri* build an *osali* as a symbol of glory for their village. As a result, every congregation and every church-organisation is eager to build its own *osali*, often causing conflicts with the neighbouring villages regarding the location of building sites. As an illustration: on 7 Juli 2013, there was “church building dedication ceremony” in one of the village in Nias. I was surprised to find out that they built such huge church building, 22 x 30 m, complete with its high tower, tiles floor, and luxurious church decoration while most of the members are actually poor. Majority of them own very simple houses, although some have fine houses made from cements and bricks. In that dedication ceremony, they invited 48 neighboring multi-denominations churches and also government representatives. My second surprised was that when we had meal, they prepared food for around 2000 people, and they slaughtered 96 ekor pigs (Rp 2-3 million for each pig). They were very happy and enthusiastic. Why? For them, being able to erect a church building is a great glory, self-honor, part of self-identity, and that is the reason for huge celebration. It is the same way of erecting a house or a village in Nias tradition.
- (3) *Thirdly*, unlike the teachings of the missionaries that *osali* is a place used only for spiritual matter, the local people believe the *osali* to be a place for *adat* ceremonies as well. They bring all cultural issues and family conflicts into the church. The problem is that my church has not been able to engage in all problems/struggles experience by the church members. Maybe because the influence of pietism, my church is far from all of that. The entire life’s problem is responded through worship and choir. The Word remains still in words, not yet actualized in all dimensions of living.
- (4) *Fourthly*, the community elders played – and still play – a central role in the *osali* (congregation), not only in terms of decision making but also in terms of status. They decide, for example, the seat arrangements during worship service. They themselves demand to sit in the front pews. Naturally, this sometimes causes nasty conflicts as well. In various occasions, the seating are ordered based on social status in the community or in the government. That makes my church so hierartical and not a community of believers, or part of the body whose head is Christ. Poor church members find themselves inferior, and as if there is no place for them inside the church.
- (5) *Fifth, exclusivisme perspective is dominant*. The effect of the notion that Osali is owned by villagers and closed for other people, strengthened by pietisme with individualistic attitude, and the exclusivist salvation, make it difficult for my church to accept the **pluralis view**. For example: the presence of other organizations or denominations are considered as “false teaching” or “trouble maker” for “Osali.” When there are members who transfer to other church organizations or denominations, they are considered as “heretics” and should be given “church’s sanction.” Moreover, when Niassan move outside Nias island, they experience difficulty to integrate with other people, and so they

establish their own Nias church in that place. When two of Indonesian Minister issue a new policy that stated to be able to build a church, it should receive approval from the neighborhood community, Niassans are very sad because Niassans think, they are losing their identity.

3. Renewal through capacity building

Up to 1980, the clergy in my church are mostly teacher preachers and few pastors with formal theological background (SMTh and STh). Lack of pastors, either in number and in quality affects the development of theology in the church. From 1995- present, we begin to have pastors with masterate degree, and there is still only one with doctorate degree, and 400 pastors with bachelor degree. The role of UEM in giving scholarship for Master Theology students in my church is very significant. With the increasing theologians in my church, renewal is also taking place. Ecumenical activities that were participated by some pastors from our church also bring renewal in our theology and church program in Nias.

The church continues to develop its contextual theology. In this situation, self-reliance becomes an essential strategy to bring transformation in our church. It is important to note that the self-reliance does not reside on the “quantity” but on the “quality” of human resources. The quality mean here as the ability to bring God’s reign in the midst of our life reality. The next struggle, however, is that our theology education is still very much oriented inside the church and not able to tackle to go out to meet the struggle of the people. The curriculum of theology education is not yet relevant, and it is formulated based on the assumptions that are not serving the need of the people. As the result, our candidate pastors are mostly just able to preach, have good conduct, diligent to do pastoral works, but not able to do social analysis and the position of the church in this changing society.¹⁰

On the other hand, the effort toward self-reliance is not separated from the involvement of all members of communion. Either from theology perspective and social perspective, both are affirming the important of the “role” of community members for the common purpose. It is the same thing with self reliace of the church, the involvement of lay people is very important.¹¹ Therefore, the church is called to educate and to empower its members. The purpose of education is not only that the church members become a “pious members” who support the fund and ministry, but the most important thing is that they are able to theologizing as well.¹² The education of the church members is aimed that they become mature Christian who understand the power and the will of God in the life of the people, the church and the community in the day to day life.¹³

The present struggle of Asian churches are charatecterized by:

¹⁰ John Titaley, “Pendidikan Teologi di Indonesia: Masalah dan Prospeknya!”, dalam Th. Sumartana, dkk (Penyunting), *Terbit Sepucuk Taruk : Teologi Kehidupan (60 tahun Dr. Liem Khien Yang,* (Jakarta, PSM-STTJ & Balitbang PGI, 1993), 162-182

¹¹ *Pemakai istilah “kaum awam” disini hanyalah untuk membedakan antara pelayan dengan warga jemaat.*

¹² Lihat lebih lanjut tentang “Teologi kaum awam” dalam bukunya H. Kreamer, *Theologi Kaum Awam*, (Jakarta, BPK-BM), 55-119

¹³ T. B. Simatupang, *Kehadiran Kristen Dalam Perang REvolusi dan Pembangunan: berjuang Mengamalkan Pancasila dalam Terang Iman*, (Jakarta: BPK-BM, 1986), 104.

- Pluralism in religion and culture
- High level of poverty;
- Suffering from various social conflicts,
- Gender and ethnic injustices and discriminations
- Natural and Human Made disasters
- Ecology destruction

Above are the context of our churches, and we are called to bring God's reign in this situation. We are called together with other parties to bring changes and transformation in the present crises. The church are called to fulfill its calling "to proclaim good news" (Lk. 4:18-19) that God is on the side of those who are oppressed and poor, that Christ alone is fighting for the side of those who are marginalized in His time. This Good News are waited by those who are "hungry, thirsty, naked, sick, in prison," (Mat. 25:30-40). In other words "Good News" is not proclaimed verbally (by words) about who Christ is (Mat 7:21; Lukas 6:46), is proclaimed through concrete and real actions and through the active participation to be on the side of those who are struggling, just like what Christ does, our example. This is the mission of the church that is contextual and transformative. **The presence of the church that is concrete and rooted, transforming the entire community completely and holistically.**

4. Reflection on Luther's Reformation

Departing from the experience and condition mentioned above, I think it is very important to reflect on the existing and developing ecclesiology in Nias, Indonesia, and Asia. It is very important to reflect again on the Priesthood of All Believers and Diaconia.

For me, the **First Point** is to reflect seriously the Cross Theology which was developed by Luther. For him "That person does not deserve to be called a theologian who looks upon the invisible things of God as though they were clearly perceptible in those things which have actually happened [Rom. 1:20-21]. He deserves to be called a theologian, however, who comprehends the visible and manifest things of God seen through suffering and the cross. A theologian of glory calls evil good and good evil. A theologian of the cross calls the thing what it actually is. That wisdom which sees the invisible things of God in works as perceived by man is completely puffed up, blinded, and hardened. These statements actually encapsulate the heart of Luther's theology, and a good grasp of what he means by the obscure terms and phrases they contain sheds light not just on the doctrinal content of his theology, but also on the very way that he believed theologians should think. Indeed, he is taking Paul's explosive argument from 1 Corinthians and developing it into a full theological agenda. At the heart of his argument is his notion that human beings should not speculate about who God is or how he acts in advance of actually seeing whom he has revealed himself to be. Thus, Luther sees God's revelation of himself as axiomatic to all theology. Now, there probably is not a heretic in history who would not agree with that, because all theology presupposes the revelation of God, whether in nature, human reason, culture, or whatever. Luther, however, had a dramatically restrictive view of revelation. God revealed himself as merciful to humanity in the Incarnation, when

he manifested himself in human flesh, and the supreme moment of that revelation was on the cross at Calvary.

Indeed, Luther sometimes referred enigmatically to Christ crucified as "God's backside"—the point at which God appeared to be the very contradiction of all that one might reasonably have anticipated him to be. The "theologians of glory," therefore, are those who build their theology in the light of what they expect God to be like—and, surprise, surprise, they make God to look something like themselves. The "theologians of the cross," however, are those who build their theology in the light of God's own revelation of himself in Christ hanging on the cross. When theologians of glory read about divine power in the Bible, or use the term in their own theology, they assume that it is analogous to human power. They suppose that they can arrive at an understanding of divine power by magnifying to an infinite degree the most powerful thing of which they can think. In light of the cross, however, this understanding of divine power is the very opposite of what divine power is all about. Divine power is revealed in the weakness of the cross, for it is in his apparent defeat at the hands of evil powers and corrupt earthly authorities that Jesus shows his divine power in the conquest of death and of all the powers of evil. So when a Christian talks about divine power, or even about church or Christian power, it is to be conceived of in terms of the cross—power hidden in the form of weakness. For Luther, the same procedure must be applied to other theological terms. For example, God's wisdom is demonstrated in the foolishness of the cross. Who would have thought up the foolish idea of God taking human flesh in order to die a horrendous death on behalf of sinners who had deliberately defied him, or God making sinners pure by himself becoming sin for them, or God himself raising up a people to newness of life by himself submitting to death? We could go on, looking at such terms as *life*, *blessing*, *holiness*, and *righteousness*. Every single one must be reconceived in the light of the cross. All are important theological concepts; all are susceptible to human beings casting them in their own image; and all must be recast in the light of the cross.

This insight is one of the factors in Luther's thinking that gives his theology an inner logic and coherence. Take, for example, his understanding of justification, whereby God declares the believer to be righteous in his sight, not by virtue of any intrinsic righteousness (anything that the believer has done or acquired), but on the basis of an *alien* righteousness, the righteousness of Christ that remains external to the believer. Is this not typical of the strange but wonderful logic of the God of the cross? The person who is really unrighteous, really mired in sin, is actually declared by God to be pure and righteous! Such a truth is incomprehensible to human logic, but makes perfect sense in light of the logic of the cross. And what of the idea of a God who comes down and loves the unlovely and the unrighteous before the objects of his love have any inclination to love him or do good? Such is incomprehensible to the theologians of glory, who assume that God is like them, like other human beings, and thus only responds to those who are intrinsically attractive or good, or who first earn his favor in some way. But the cross shows that God is not like that: against every assumption that human beings might make about who God is and how he acts, he requires no prior loveliness in the objects of his love; rather, his prior love creates that loveliness

without laying down preconditions. Such a God is revealed with amazing and unexpected tenderness and beauty in the ugly and violent drama of the cross.¹⁴

Internalizing “The Way of the Cross” that is proposed by Luther is very helpful for Asian Churches in developing their ecclesiology in Asia, so that the churches will also follow the way of the cross in solidarity with the suffering and groaning world. The implication of this position is explained in the understanding of the position of clergy in the church that has been penetrated by power. The churches are called to emptying themselves in carrying out their task and calling to bring the sign of God’s reign in this world.

Second Point, is to reflect on the concept of justification. Luther said that we will not receive forgiveness of sins and righteousness before God by good deeds and self-holiness, but we receive forgiveness and justification before God **only by grace**, for the sake of Christ **through faith**, that when we believe Christ suffers for us so that we receive eternal life. The Book of Concord said that, sinful human beings are made right before God and be saved only because of faith in Jesus Christ alone and therefore Christ is our only righteousness. Christ is God and human being that in Him the full nature of God and human beings are blended with each other (Jer. 23:6; 1 Cor. 1:30; 2 Cor. 5:21).[36] Furthermore, the righteousness of human beings are only by God’s grace, without good works, without merits, from our part that we are accepted by God in God’s grace and we are considered right. Faith is the only way to accept Christ and in Jesus Christ we receive “truths that help before God” and for Jesus Christ, faith as such is counted as righteousness (Rom. 4:5).

Third Point is about “priesthood of all believers.” In Luther’s time, it was believed that there were two level of living, temporal and spiritual. Religious people (Pope, bishop, priest, monks) were in the spiritual level, while the others (princes, kings, carpenters, farmers, etc) are in the temporal level. Spiritual level was considered higher than temporal level. That was why Luther developed the concept of “priesthood of all believers.” Luther said that every Christian comes from spiritual level and there was no different among them, except in terms of position but not status. The idea of priesthood of all believers is very important to be developed in our present ecclesia, although the context is different. At present, there is wide gap between clergy who considered more “involved” than “the church members.” Therefore, many church members are competing to get position as clergy. The position in the church is viewed as putting up one’s status or prestige in the community.

Fourth Point, it should be read critically the idea of Luther regarding the two kingdom which differentiated the spiritual governance and secular governance. For Luther, spiritual governance from God is implemented through God’s Word and the guidance of the Holy Spirit. The faithful believer does not need further guidance from anyone about how he conducts his life as he acts in accordance of God’s will. It is like a tree that naturally produce fruits, the faithful believers will act morally and responsibly. Luther also stressed the difference between human

¹⁴ See Herb Keistmann, *The Way of the Cross*

concept and divine concept about “righteousness” and “justice” dan “keadilan”, the typical characteristic of cross theology. God’s standar on justice question all matters in this world. Secular governance in this world is carried out through kings, princes, judges by using swords and state law. They do not have any rights in the teaching. They cannot position themselves as master above God’s Word.

Although the leaders belong to the secular world, but they are doing God’s works. Regardless they are faithful believer or not, they remain doing a divine role (Luther refers to Roma 13:1-7 and 1 Petrus 2:13-14). God has decided that order is....for the creation to maintain peace and to suppress sins.

So, God rules the church with the Holy Spirit through the Good News without enforcement. He rules with the secular sword power. Not because He is violence, but because the hardened hard of human beings in sins. If human beings do not have sins, then there is no need for enforcement. God establishes the politic rule to control the greed and cruelty of human beings. This is the result of sin’s inclination.

The Last Point is about Diaconia calling. The task of the church is to proclaim the Gospel that is informative and transformatie. The Good News is proclaimed to all the creation that is groaning, waiting for the transformation to take place. The church witness takes two forms, prophetic witness and marturia witness. Torah is used by secular world, while Gospel is used by spiritual leaders. An ethicist, Larry Rasmussen, in the book “God, Goods and Common Good” said that the role of the church in the community should fulfill: (1) moral deliberation (2) moral formation, and (3) moral action.

This states that the call of the church is to proclaim God’s Word and Serving the Sacrament, not only through verbal, but also actualized in the daily reality and that is “care for the poor”. In Luther’s time, he was against the task of the deacon related with the ministry of care and social.¹⁵ This has to say that in Luther’s reformation, the diaconia ministry of the church has significant place. In our present context, this is an urgent and important call, either in the form of caricative, reformatie and transformative diaconia.

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