

**CHRISTIAN TOM BOON IN THAILAND**

**Problems in the Modern Day Thai Church**

**By**

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## INTRODUCTION

Christianity is not new to Thailand. In 1518 AD, the first missionaries to Thailand were Roman Catholic from Portugal. In the year 1688, all westerners were removed from the country by either exile or death. It wasn't until 1780, that missionaries were allowed back into the country.<sup>1</sup> Throughout the years, many missionaries have come and gone. Churches have been established, with moderate success. Today in a country with a population of around 70,000,000 people, only 1.2% claim to be Christian, whether Protestant or Catholic.<sup>2</sup> The most significant growth has come in the late 20<sup>th</sup> Century and the early 21<sup>st</sup> Century. While some of this growth came through a wide variety of church movements, much of it has come through the evangelism of what are known today as full gospel churches.

Thailand has been an Animist country since it's beginning. Yet alongside Animism, Buddhism has flourished. Today, the two have married themselves into one, and is the mainstream religious focus of the majority of people throughout the country. The traditions, offerings and moral laws of the two are very hard to distinguish to the untrained eye, and many times they overlap and complement each other. When a Thai person is introduced to Christianity for the first time, it is easy for them to disregard the differences and to look for common ground. Where do the moral laws agree? What traditions are the same? How can one appease the gods or God? This is a big challenge to the Christian missionary. Christianity is so exclusive in nature, that a Thai person hearing it for the first time will not accept it fully. While they will politely listen, they

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<sup>1</sup>Youth With a Mission, <http://www.ywamthai.org/office/religion>

<sup>2</sup> Joshua Project, <http://joshuaproject.net/countries.php>

are really only looking to find where this new religion agrees with the one they already have.

Tom Boon is one aspect of the Buddhist/Animist religion that has unfortunately crossed over into Christianity in Thailand. This paper will begin by describing what Tom Boon is according to Thai culture and religion. A form of a Christian merit system that has been brought over from the West will then be discussed. After that, a Biblical argument will be made against this merit system, followed by a proposed practical solution to this problem.

## **TOM BOON**

As mentioned in the introduction, Buddhism and Animism are at the heart of Thai culture. The two are interconnected, and are at the root of the core beliefs of the Thai person. Even Thai people who do not consider themselves religious are influenced by both traditions. For example, it is customary in Thailand to regard the head of another person as sacred. It is very improper to touch another person's head without proper permission first. Even the atheist will instinctively follow this principal. Yet this tradition has significant religious ideas behind it. When Buddhism and Animism are considered, one must take the approach that even when a Thai person converts to Christianity, certain aspects of their old faith are very difficult to disassociate from. Some of these aspects, such as the example with the head, are fine to hold onto, but there are others that contradict the Christian faith, but are just as difficult to let go of.

Animism is one of the largest, if not the largest, religion in the world. It is a hard statistic to figure out, because it blends in so well with many other religions. Besides

Buddhism, it is integrated into Hinduism, Taoism and Confucianism. It is also seen in most African tribal religions and Native American religions as well. In his paper titled “Animism, Syncretism, and Christianity in Thailand,” Karl Dahlfred uses the following statement to describe Animism.

“The essence of animism is the using of religious rituals and ceremonies to manipulate the spirit world into doing what the animist wants it to do, whether that be warding off evil or giving blessing. Animism does not require internal or ethical change. Animism at its core is pragmatic and utilitarian. It is transactional, not relational.”<sup>3</sup>

These spirits can be good or evil. They can be the ghost of a dead relative, the spirit of a tree, the spirit of a river, or some other type of deity. In Thailand, even a human being can be worshiped as a deity. Some Thai people today worship their king Bhumibol Adulyadej.

This practice ties in nicely with Buddhism. Buddhists follow the teachings of Siddhartha Gautama, an Indian prince who lived over 2500 years ago. His basic message was about suffering and how to cease it. When looking at Buddhism’s basic elements, it can look more like a philosophy than a religion. It is an attempt to understand the world and its functions in order to manipulate it and end any suffering. While at its inception, it tried to break free from its Hindu roots, it never established any religious identity of its own and thus took on the form of local and tribal religions wherever it went.

One of the major truths that Buddhism teaches is the law of Karma. Karma can be defined simply as follows. When one does evil, evil will return to that person. When one does good, good will return to that person. Steve Cioccolanti rightly points out in his book “From Buddha to Jesus”, that Buddhism is a works based religion. There are 227 rules written down for men to follow and 311 rules for women. The reason one would

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<sup>3</sup> Dahlfred, Karl, “Animism, Syncretism, and Christianity in Thailand” (2011) p.7

follow these rules is to avoid bad karma and earn good karma.<sup>4</sup> Buddhists believe in reincarnation. Yet they also believe that there is an in-between state the soul goes to after death. This can be thought of as either heaven or hell.<sup>5</sup> Good and bad karma follow the person after death and determine which state of the between-life they will go to. The Karma then follows them to the next life and determines what state of life they will be born into.

In Thailand, this idea of earning good karma, or earning merit is summed up in two words, “Tom Boon”. “Tom” means “to make”, while “Boon” translates as “merit.” In other words, Tom Boon is to make merit. Alex G. Smith points out that Buddhist will teach their children early on in life that they need to rely on themselves, particularly when it comes to salvation. They must earn merit to achieve it.<sup>6</sup> While in some sense Smith is correct, in Thailand there is a strong notion that merit can be passed from one person to another. For example, when a man turns 21, he will become a monk for three months to earn merit for his mother. Also, when a parent dies, a child will typically become a monk again for three or four days. All this merit earned passes on to the deceased and helps them to enter into heaven.<sup>7</sup>

While sacrificial Tom Boon is readily practiced in Thailand, most instances occur for the individual’s own salvation. When a person is going through a difficult time in life, a typical Thai solution will be to Tom Boon. If they go offer a gift to the monks, they believe the difficulties will go away. If a person is applying to a university, often

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<sup>4</sup> Cioccolanti, Steve. From Buddha to Jesus – An Insiders view of Buddhism, location 688-720

<sup>5</sup> Hughs, Philip. “Christianity and Buddhism in Thailand” (January – July, 1985) p. 28,29

<sup>6</sup> Smith, Alex G. “Missiological Implications of Key Contrasts Between Buddhism and Christianity” (Unfinished work as of 2013) p. 4,5

<sup>7</sup> Cioccolanti, Steve. From Buddha to Jesus – An Insiders view of Buddhism, location 768-800

they will offer gifts at a spirit house on the campus in order to appease the spirits of the university, thus earning merit and entrance into the school. The same thing will happen when a person wants employment or a promotion at a company. What this boils down to is the belief that salvation is something that needs to be earned, and Tom Boon is the way to earn it.

There are many different ways Thai people can Tom Boon. Some are mentioned above. The most typical way is by giving food or money at the local “wat” or temple. Some will go purchase a caged animal and release it to the wild as a good deed. The feeding of stray dogs will also bring about good Karma to a person. Doing good deeds are seen as ways of earning merit. A person could help the poor, the orphans or the elderly to receive blessing or good luck.

There’s a small lake in Nakhon Ratchasima named Sa Crok. Everyday gifts of rice and red soda are offered at the spirit house of this lake. Many times Thai dancers can be seen offering a dance to the spirit of the lake. One local man can be frequently seen meditating next to the spirit house. On occasion, one might hear a song being sung to the deity. Cars and motorbikes that drive by will honk their horns showing respect to the spirit. These examples point out how one little community of Thai people strive to earn merit.

In summary, Buddhism and Animism are intermingled so closely in Thailand that it is hard to distinguish them from one another. The law of karma drives the Thai person to Tom Boon, or to make merit. There are many different ways to Tom Boon. It is the means of salvation for each person.



## THE CHRISTIAN MERIT SYSTEM

To see how Christianity fits into this Eastern religious Thai culture, we must begin in the West. For the most part, it has been Western Christianity (with a strong emphasis on American Christianity) that has invaded this country and its people. Today, there are more missionaries than ever before. Within this cluster, there are many different forms of doctrine, tradition and practice. Listed are a few to show the distinctions: Baptists, Presbyterians, Assemblies of God, Mennonite, and Catholics. There is also what could be called “Lone Ranger” or independent missionaries. These people have either established their own personal mission agency or they’ve come as tent makers. They represent their own distinct views and doctrines. Throw into the mix the heretical teachings of the Latter Day Saints movement and Jehovah Witnesses, and one can see that there is a mixed bag of “Christian” teachings at the forefront of the modern missionary movement in Thailand.

All of these groups bring with them different forms of the gospel. One may argue that all Protestant faiths preach the same gospel, no matter what the other differences are, yet, when looked at carefully, this is not the case. In the quote below, R. C. Sproul conveys this very sentiment.

I hear that from a lot of folks. They say to me, “I just don’t feel the need for Christ.” As if Christianity were something that were packaged and sold through Madison Avenue! That what we’re trying to communicate to people is “Here’s something that’s going to make you feel good, and everybody needs a little of this in their closet or in their refrigerator,” as if it were some commodity that’s going to add a dash of happiness to our lives.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Sproul, R. C., Why do I Need Jesus?, 1996, <http://www.ligonier.org/learn/articles/why-do-i-need-jesus/> accessed February 17, 2013

The reason Dr. Sproul has heard this so many times is because this has become the message in so many churches in America. Today, one could enter any number of evangelical mega churches and hear sermons focused on Jesus fixing worldly problems such as sickness, or unemployment. The pastor will share with the congregation three or four practical steps that they can do to accomplish the fulfilled life they desire. Instead of proclaiming the sinfulness of man and the need for a savior, they teach that fulfillment in this life can be achieved though one's one ability to do a certain work and please God. This has been part of the formula for successful mega churches and many have followed suit hoping to see the same success in their own churches.

Pastor Joel Osteen provides a great example of this. Currently his church is one of the largest churches in the US. His example of preaching is considered by many as a model for church growth. But his message is really nothing more than what you could find in a typical self-help book.<sup>9</sup> Joel preaches a form of the Word-Faith heresy, where when one proclaims something, it becomes a reality. One cause of such teaching can be traced to the influence of capitalistic secularism in American culture. D. A. Carson suggests that many Americans are tricked into believing that "God exists to bless."<sup>10</sup> Today, Thai culture has experienced much of the same capitalistic, secular tendencies seen in America.

Why is Christian culture in America so important to missions in Thailand? If you think of Christianity as a commodity, the majority of it is imported in from America and other Western nations. (South Korea could also be considered as a major player in

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<sup>9</sup> Carson, D.A., Christ & Culture Revisited, p.118

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., p. 142

today's mission's world.<sup>11</sup>) With this import comes all the cultural baggage. While the gospel does go forth, so also do many of the false gospels that the West produces. Dahlfred, in his blog article titled "Animism and the Prosperity Gospel" shares how the prosperity gospel is infiltrating the Thai Church.<sup>12</sup> This is the idea that God desires Christians to have good health and become rich. Both health and wealth are achieved by producing enough faith and/or through faithful obedience. This causes a confusion of law and gospel. First, what does the gospel promise believers and when do these promises occur? Second, is salvation something to be earned, or is it freely given by the grace of God?

One thing that links these false movements is this notion that merit is a part of Christianity in one form or another. It could be blatantly obvious with proclaiming that one's eternal salvation is earned, or it could be a reduced form such as people earning for themselves temporary blessings. This is seen in the different approaches people take to sharing the gospel message. Some missionaries will share the true gospel, but then ask to pray for the Thai person in an area of need, hoping that God will come through and in essence prove Christianity true. They don't take the time to distinguish faith in Christ for eternal salvation from faith in Christ for healing or blessing. The one is guaranteed, where the other is not. What tends to happen is confusion on what the Christian message is.

There are others that don't even go as far as sharing the true gospel, but rather go straight to the need. They will combine the gospel message of faith in Jesus for the

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<sup>11</sup> Mandryk, Jason. Operation World: Seventh Edition The Definitive Prayer Guide to Every Nation, p. 510

<sup>12</sup> Dahlfred, Karl, "Animism and the Prosperity Gospel" <http://dahlfred.com/blogs/gleanins-from-the-field/74-animism-and-the-prosperity-gospel>

forgiveness of sins with faith in healing. They claim that God promises healing to those who have truly have faith. With this approach, salvation becomes contingent on whether or not a person receives healing or blessing.

Both methods to the gospel are faulty in the fact that they neglect the power of the gospel message itself. Instead of trusting God to change people's hearts from the proclamation of God's Word, they rely on miracles and signs to convince their audience of the truth of Christianity. That's not to say that signs and miracles cannot occur and cannot be used to point people to Jesus, but it is the proclamation of the gospel that God uses as a means of salvation. The apostle Paul shares this in his epistle to the Church in Rome. "For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek." (Romans 1:16)<sup>13</sup>

These methods don't limit themselves to evangelism only. They also enter into the pulpit. Many churches in Thailand seldom preach the gospel message to their congregations. Hughs notes that during his time spent in Thailand he attended thirty sermons, of which the gospel was only mentioned six times.<sup>14</sup> This also is a mentality that has come from the West.

One of the more gospel needy provinces in Thailand is Nakhon Ratchasima. In this province, currently one of the largest churches has roughly 400 people in attendance every Sunday. Yet this church focuses their preaching on the prosperity gospel and is influenced by the teachings of Benny Hinn. In comparison, in the same city is a church that week in and week out preaches the gospel message to the congregation. This church roughly has around 50 people in attendance every week. There are probably many

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<sup>13</sup> All Scripture quotations are taken from the English Standard Version, except where otherwise noted.

<sup>14</sup> Hughs, Phillip, "Christianity and Buddhism in Thailand" (January – July, 1985) p. 33-34

different factors that determine this discrepancy of attendance numbers, but the message that is preached is most likely the main reason. With the larger church, a merit system is taught. The blessings of this life come through faith and obedience to Jesus. With the smaller church, there is no promise of blessing in this life, only the promise of eternal life that comes from faith alone in Jesus.

At the larger church, every service will have a time of “testimonies”. Here, anyone is welcome to come to the microphone and share his or her story. The majority of these stories are about how God had in one way blessed that person’s life either physically or financially. In contrast, at the smaller church, every service will have a time where the congregation will recite the Apostle’s Creed and the Ten Commandments. The one has a focus on the person or individual, while the other has a focus on God. The one teaches that the merit system works, while the other teaches the truths of God’s Word.

In light of these things, the question that needs to be asked is, “Are people really entering into a saving relationship with Jesus Christ where the true gospel is hardly ever preached?” Hughs’ research presents some shocking statistics.

However, when the law of *karma* was expressed in terms of the saying "Do good, receive good; do evil, receive evil" in a questionnaire given to Christian and Buddhist students, its truth was affirmed just as strongly by the Christians as by the Buddhists. Eighty-one percent of the Christian students completing that questionnaire affirmed that they thought merit making was important. Their reasons were similar to those of the Buddhists.<sup>15</sup>

When Thai Christians were asked in interviews how salvation was possible in Christianity, neither Christ nor his death were ever mentioned. There was no suggestion in any of the interviews, or in any of the sermons recorded, that the death of Christ was essential to forgiveness and

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid., p. 29

salvation. The general response was that God forgives people because He loves them.<sup>16</sup>

From the two quotes above, you can see both a merit-based system alive in Thai Christianity, along with an absence of the true meaning of the gospel. Though Hughs' work was done over twenty years ago, not much has changed in Thailand. The teaching of a merit-based Christianity still exists and it distorts people's understanding of the true message of salvation.

Yet this merit-based Christianity is very attractive to the Thai people. It resembles the system they were born into. In times of trouble or need, the Thai will go either to the monks at the temple or to a favorite spirit in order to Tom Boon. This action is a way to shift the karmic scales in their favor. When a Thai becomes a Christian, this habit is hard to break. In times of need, they will offer a special gift to the church, thinking that God will now bless them because of their sacrifice. Hughs points out that this is particularly practiced during weddings or birthdays. The Thai tradition is to offer gifts to the monks on such occasions to receive favor. This practice is now mimicked in Thai churches.<sup>17</sup> Traditions like these are often reinforced during "testimony" times during church services. Dahlfred points out that often these stories highlight the fact that God has blessed the person either financially or physically. He then ties in the idea that many of these beliefs about God stem from their former beliefs about bargaining with Spirits for the desired needs.<sup>18</sup>

Unfortunately, much of the Christianity coming out of the West only reinforces this idea. It has become an attractive message to Thai Buddhists, because it represents an

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid., p. 34

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., p. 31

<sup>18</sup> Dahlfred, Karl, "Animism and the Prosperity Gospel" <http://dahlfred.com/blogs/gleanins-from-the-field/74-animism-and-the-prosperity-gospel>

alternative and superior way to practice Tom Boon. Hughs nicely demonstrates this in his work.

One northern Thai Christian confirmed that this comparison was valid when she explained that she and many other Christians considered the way of Christianity to be higher than that of Buddhism just as the way of the monk is higher than that of a lay-person within Buddhism. The Christian has more rules to keep and a higher standard of morality to maintain than the Buddhist. One can change from the lower standards of Buddhism to the higher standards of Christianity through repentance and acceptance of God's forgiveness for the failures and inadequacies of the lower way. After that, one is expected to keep the higher way, with God's help. While it may be more difficult to maintain the higher standards, the corresponding benefits would be much greater.

The terminology of *karma* and merit-making are not used among the Protestant Christians, but the general principles underlying them are generally affirmed. The Christians are just as sure as the Buddhist that if one does good, one will receive good, and if one does evil, one will receive evil. They see Christianity as providing an alternative teaching to Buddhism on how to do good and thus receive the benefits.<sup>19</sup>

As both Dahlfred and Hughs point out, there is ample evidence of a merit-based system in the Thai church today. This leaves us with one great concern, are these Thai Christians really Christian? Are they placing their faith in Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of their sins, or are they relying on their own works to save them? If it is the latter, then a false security has been set up in these people's lives, a security based on worldly blessings rather than an eternal blessing that points forward to Christ's return and the resurrection of the dead.

Many of these "Christians" are still living in a transactional system of merit, and are at times discouraged or disappointed when the system falls apart. What happens to someone's faith when they give that big offering to the church, yet they are passed on a promotion from work? How does one react when they offer up their time to serve the

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<sup>19</sup> Hughs, Phillip, "Christianity and Buddhism in Thailand" (January – July, 1985) p. 36

church and the needy, yet God still refuses to answer their prayer for healing? Dahlfred points out that many of the new Thai Christians eventually walk away from the faith because of this very thing. He cites one Thai pastor that claims about 80% of new Thai Christians eventually leave the church.<sup>2021</sup> This begs the question as to what it is that they believed in the first place. Was it a gospel of works or a gospel of grace? And how about the ones who remain in the church? Are they the fortunate 20% that are getting their earthly needs met? Do they know and believe the true gospel message?

While Hughs' survey offers some light to the answer of whether or not these Thai "believers" are truly Christian, it is really hard to estimate the percentage of true Christians inside the Thai church. Ultimately, only God knows that number. But the disturbing evidences that have been brought forth should be cause enough to provoke reform among missionaries in Thailand and Thai church leadership. Before a solution is put forth, a biblical argument should be made pointing out why a merit-based system should be rejected by Christian evangelists and preachers.

### **THE BIBLICAL ARGUMENT AGAINST CHRISTIAN TOM BOON**

One thing preachers of the merit-based gospel are known for is citing Old Testament scripture. There's nothing wrong with that approach per se, as long as the interpretation is sound. What often times happens is that a passage that is written about a certain person or a certain nation will be interpreted to have the same implications for the Christian of today.

For example, in Joshua 10 we see Joshua commanding the sun and moon to stand

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<sup>20</sup> Dahlfred, Karl, "Animism, Syncretism, and Christianity in Thailand" (2011) p. 11

<sup>21</sup> Dahlfred, Karl, "Moving Beyond Felt Needs" <http://www.dahlfred.com/blogs/gleanings-from-the-field/290-moving-beyond-felt-needs>



still so that the battle can continue and Israel can win the victory. This passage is at times reinterpreted to communicate that if Christians pray boldly like Joshua then they will gain victories in their own life. Instead of seeing the true meaning of the passage, that God is in control of everything and uses even the sun and moon to rescue His people and His royal offspring. With the first interpretation, God is powerless unless the Christian acts. The second interpretation places the emphasis on God, rather than man for salvation.

To see how God saves, one must first recognize the problem. In Genesis, Adam and Eve were the first humans. They were created in God's image and were placed in the Garden of Eden. God gave them only one command to obey.

And the Lord God commanded the man, saying, "You may surely eat of every tree of the garden, but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die." (Genesis 2:16,17)

Eve was deceived by the serpent, and both she and her husband disobeyed God's command by eating the fruit. Sin entered creation and so did death. A curse was placed on the man, the woman and serpent. But before God cursed Adam and Eve, a promise was given specifically to the serpent. "I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and her offspring; he shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel." (Genesis 3:15)

This is the first promise of the messiah and redemption for mankind. A man shall come to destroy the serpent, but the serpent will strike a blow on the man as well. This promise isn't conditional on man's work, but it is given without anything expected from man. This is the first example of God's salvation not being transactional.

(As an aside, since the discussion is now focused on the origin of sin, it seems good to reference Hughs once more. He notes that many Thai Christians don't have a

Biblical view when it comes to sin. He claims that they view sin only as actions, whereas the Bible describes sin as human nature.<sup>22</sup>)

The promise of the messiah manifests itself throughout the Old Testament in different forms and shadows.

Now the Lord said to Abram, “Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. And I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonors you I will curse, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.” (Genesis 12:1-3)

One thing to notice here, nothing is really asked of Abram. God promises this to him without any meritorious work to be done. God then gives to Abram, or Abraham, a son named Isaac even though both he and his wife were too old to conceive. It is through Isaac’s line that the blessing to all nations will come.

Then comes a strange twist to the story... God tells Abraham to sacrifice Isaac on Mount Moriah. Amazingly, Abraham obeys, and takes his son up the mountain. Isaac asks his father where the lamb for the offering is. Prophetically, Abraham answers, “God will provide for himself the lamb for a burnt offering, my son.” (Genesis 22:8) Yet Abraham tied up his son and was about to strike when God sent his angel to intervene. A ram was caught in the thicket and Abraham offered up that animal instead of his son.

Interestingly, it is believed that Mount Moriah is the same mountain that the Temple was built on in Jerusalem.<sup>23</sup> For many years, the nation of Israel offered sacrifices to God for forgiveness of their sins. This story is a shadow of Jesus and His sacrifice. Abraham offers up his son Isaac. God offers up his son Jesus. Isaac wasn’t

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<sup>22</sup> Hughs, Phillip, “Christianity and Buddhism in Thailand” (January – July, 1985) p. 33,34

<sup>23</sup> The Lutheran Study Bible Kindle Edition (ESV), location 11233-11250

innocent, but was rescued by the innocent blood of a ram. Jesus is innocent and offers up his blood to rescue sinful man.

Years later, the nation of Israel found themselves trapped in Egypt working as slaves. God raised up Moses to enact His deliverance. In this rescue, ten plagues are brought upon the Egyptians. The last is particularly interesting. God kills the firstborn sons of both men and animals in Egypt. Yet the Israelite children were rescued because lamb's blood covered the frames of their doors. Again, we see death of the son, and rescue by the blood of the lamb. A foreshadow of Christ.

Where a lot of the modern day confusion breaks in is with the Mosaic Law. After Israel was freed from Egypt, they made a covenant as a nation to God. This is a national covenant for Israel only and should not represent the law Christians should be under today.

while Moses went up to God. The Lord called to him out of the mountain, saying, "Thus you shall say to the house of Jacob, and tell the people of Israel: You yourselves have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself. Now therefore, if you will indeed obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession among all peoples, for all the earth is mine; and you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. These are the words that you shall speak to the people of Israel." (Exodus 19:3-6)

Many of the laws of the Mosaic covenant have been carried over into the Church.

A great example of this is the tithe. The word tithe means "a tenth."

Every tithe of the land, whether of the seed of the land or of the fruit of the trees, is the Lord's; it is holy to the Lord. If a man wishes to redeem some of his tithe, he shall add a fifth to it. And every tithe of herds and flocks, every tenth animal of all that pass under the herdsman's staff, shall be holy to the Lord. One shall not differentiate between good or bad, neither shall he make a substitute for it; and if he does substitute for it, then both it and the substitute shall be holy; it shall not be redeemed. (Leviticus 27:30-33)

This command is used today in many churches. Pastors will claim that each church member should bring a tenth of their earnings as an offering to God.

Is this command for the church today? Look at the next verse. “These are the commandments that the Lord commanded Moses for the people of Israel on Mount Sinai.” (Leviticus 27:34) The commandment to tithe is specific to the people of Israel only. When one looks at the New Testament texts, no commandment to tithe can be found.

One thing to note about the Mosaic covenant is that it is transactional in nature. Looking at the end of Deuteronomy, one can see both a blessing for obedience to the commands of God and a curse for disobedience.

And if you faithfully obey the voice of the Lord your God, being careful to do all his commandments that I command you today, the Lord your God will set you high above all the nations of the earth. And all these blessings shall come upon you and overtake you, if you obey the voice of the Lord your God. (Deuteronomy 28:1,2)

But if you will not obey the voice of the Lord your God or be careful to do all his commandments and his statutes that I command you today, then all these curses shall come upon you and overtake you. (Deuteronomy 28:15)

In a sense, the Law of Moses can be rightly looked at as a form of national Tom Boon. Yet this Law needs to be interpreted for what its original purpose was. It was a covenant between God and the nation of Israel. What often happens in today’s churches is the practice of reading certain law passages as if they were written for the church. For example, many pastors will read this next verse, which was written specifically to Israel and declare it to be the way God interacts with his church.

if my people who are called by my name humble themselves, and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear

from heaven and will forgive their sin and heal their land. (2 Chronicles 7:14)

This practice of taking scripture and misapplying it is where a lot of the problems stem from. Thai people see things like blessings and curses and relate to it. They see that they are attached to obedience or to giving and it feels a lot like their old system, so they run with these teachings. Unfortunately, an improper hermeneutic is used and it betrays the message of the gospel.

The last passage to look at is the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5 through 7. Here many argue that Jesus is laying down the new law of the Kingdom of God. In it one can definitely see that a more stringent use of the law. Not only is one commanded not to commit adultery, but also they can no longer look at a woman lustfully. Anger towards a brother gets elevated to the level of murder. The people are commanded to be perfect as their heavenly Father is perfect. These seem enormously impossible to obey.

The key to interpreting this sermon is in its beginning. Jesus begins His sermon with the Beatitudes, or blessings.

Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted. Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied. Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy. Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God. Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God. Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you. (Matthew 5:3-12)

These blessings don't have any attachment to obedience. Instead they are attached to different states of being, such as poor in spirit or mourning. Jesus doesn't say

do this and you will be blessed. Instead, He says, you are blessed when you are. Similar themes can be seen throughout the New Testament. Having faith in Christ changes who a person is (state of being). Obedience then flows from already receiving the blessings. It is through a heart of gratitude that one obeys, rather than obeying to be blessed. This is the way the Kingdom of God works. God blesses and through that comes gratitude leading to obedience.<sup>24</sup> The message of Christian Tom Boon claims the opposite.

Further, one could point to the fact that Jesus calls someone blessed when they are persecuted. This is a contradiction to the Christian Tom Boon message. But to a message that speaks of a future eternal blessing, persecution in this life has no contradiction.<sup>25</sup>

### **A PROPOSED SOLUTION**

The gospel is always the answer to the world's problems. The questions that need asking are how one goes about sharing this message to a culture that is strongly ingrained with a merit-based system and where does contextualization cross over into syncretism? From the arguments laid forth, the strongest growing churches in Thailand are those that teach a merit-based form of Christianity, yet the majority of the Thai Christians in these churches don't have a strong grasp of the true gospel. This problem can be attacked on two fronts, from the pulpit and in evangelism.

First: the pulpit. Missionaries to Thailand and Thai pastors need proper hermeneutical training on preaching sermons. Knowing the context of passages along with proper exegesis can take away a lot of the difficulties. They should be taught to

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<sup>24</sup> DeSilva, David A., Honor, Patronage, Kinship and Purity: Unlocking New Testament Culture p. 95-156

<sup>25</sup> Carson, D.A., Christ & Culture Revisited, p. 162

preach on long sections of scripture rather than verse hopping. A healthy distinction between law and gospel should also help avoid a merit-based faith. Pastors then need to model this kind of preaching to their flock, especially the young men they are focusing their discipleship on.

Ciocolanti does a good job of making this distinction, but he takes it a bit too far. He claims that the law wasn't made for Christians, but for unbelievers. The Christian has the Holy Spirit and is guided by Him. He doesn't think the law should be preached to believers. He then goes on to claim that God's way is for the law to be used to convict unbelievers of their sins and the gospel message should then be preached to them for salvation.<sup>26</sup> While Ciocolanti understands the problem that is going on in the Thai church, his solution goes too far. Both law and gospel should be preached on a weekly basis. Christians still have the flesh to deal with. Their sin still needs to be pointed out to them. Also, the law can be used to point Christians towards doing good works. That being said, the law should be used lawfully as Paul suggests. (1 Timothy 1:8) It should always be preached alongside the message of forgiveness through Christ.

Second: evangelism. Missionaries and Thai Christians should be taught properly how to share their faith. There shouldn't be any worldly blessings attached to this message, such as healing or financial gain. Instead, the focus should be on Jesus dying for man's sins and His resurrection with the promise of one day also being resurrected to join Him for all eternity. If an evangelist desires to pray for the sick, they should make it clearly distinct from the gospel by informing the person that God can heal, but sometimes He chooses not to until Christ returns.

This next suggestion may come as a shock to many Christians, but there should be

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<sup>26</sup> Ciocolanti, Steve. From Buddha to Jesus – An Insiders view of Buddhism, location 894-945

an abandonment of the sinner's prayer. It is an unscriptural Western tradition that has worked its way into not only the Thai church, but into churches throughout the world. In the Thai context it can lead to confusion of what it means to have faith. It could be seen as a ritual similar to meditating to a spirit.<sup>27</sup> Scripture only asks for belief in the message, not a prayer. To say one has to say a prayer places the emphasis on the individual to do something to be saved. It is the beginnings of a merit-based system.

When a Thai becomes a Christian, baptism should not be a drawn out, lengthy process where classes need to be taken and evidence of a righteous life must first be displayed. This is not the example we see in scripture, particularly in the book of Acts. People came to faith and were immediately baptized. Dahlfred suggests that public baptism can be a means for breaking away from Animism and the traditions that go along with it.<sup>28</sup> One caveat to this is strong communication to the new believer that this is not something they do to earn salvation. To some, baptism can look like a work towards salvation. Yet baptism cannot be avoided, because it is scripturally commanded. (Matthew 28:19,20)

All this being said, how does this practically get done? There are three levels where this type of training can be accomplished. The first level is at the local church. Pastors or parishioners reading this paper can begin reform through Bible studies in their church, teaching sound hermeneutical principals and how to distinguish between law and gospel, separating the sure promises of the gospel from faith filled prayer for healing. The pastors can also begin to preach exegetically through long sections of scripture.

Pastors should also take the time to meet with all the individual members of their

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<sup>27</sup> Dahlfred, Karl, "Animism, Syncretism, and Christianity in Thailand" (2011) p. 17

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., p. 15



church to see exactly what they believe when it comes to God and His salvation. A series of questions should be written to determine if they understand the gospel. If they don't, the gospel should be explained to them so that they may believe.

The next level will focus on spreading this type of training to a broader stage. One way to begin is by coordinating conferences and/or seminars that focus on teaching sound doctrine and how to separate the gospel message from the good works practiced by Christians. Invitations should be focused on Church leaders in Thailand, though all are welcome. Theologically sound literature will have to be translated into Thai in order to help leaders understand the true message and practice of the faith.

Finally, the role of Thai seminaries will need to change as well. Currently, only the major cities in Thailand have what could be considered legitimate options to train. Unless they are from there, pastors have to travel out of their province to study, and many that do never come back home because of opportunities in the big city. Then there are the Thai men who cannot go due to responsibilities to support their families back home. Correspondent and online courses could help correct this problem. The correspondent courses should be started in some of the smaller cities. Students can then take one or two weeks for classes and not have to leave the cities they are ministering to. Online courses are relatively new, but they do exist and more of the educational world is heading that direction. Christian missions need to be innovative, using all means necessary to get the gospel to all nations.

## **CONCLUSION**

In Thailand today, a mixture of Buddhism and Animism is the dominant form of religion. With these two comes the merit-based system of Tom Boon and karma. This is a challenge for both missionaries and Thai pastors. Much of Western Christianity has brought along its own form of Christian Tom Boon or Christian merit making. This has led many to believe falsely when it comes to the gospel message and salvation. Biblically, there is no room for a merit-based Christianity. Instead, it is a religion that claims Jesus made the merit for us and Christians are called to repent and believe. To solve this problem, the message of the gospel needs to be proclaimed in a clear manner, distinguishing itself from merit making. Missionaries and leaders in the Thai church need to be educated on how to do this. This can be accomplished through the local church, through conferences and seminars, and through Thai seminaries breaking the traditional mold and reaching more Thai church leaders around the nation.

On a last and important note, prayer needs to be emphasized. None of the solutions proposed in this paper can come to fruition without God's hand actively involved. Christian leaders in Thailand need to seek God earnestly for these things, believing in faith that God will move the hearts of the Thai people.

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