

If there is one thing that we can learn from recent history, and not-so recent history too, is that presenting a vision of the future is at best an extremely risky affair. Several weeks ago I was sorting through a bunch of old Time magazines in preparation for putting them into the box for later recycling. As I was leafing through one of these magazines and glancing at the stories that by now were most certainly yesterday's news, I noted that the date on the cover was September 10, 2001. Nowhere in that issue of Time magazine was there even a hint of what was going to happen on September 11. The events of that day were simply beyond the pale of our vision for the future of the United States and the world. Of course, now we can, by hindsight, see all kinds of warnings that such an event, or something similar, was going to happen. But hindsight and foresight are two very different things, and the reality is that in our desire to plan for the future, we often overlook events of the past which, in due time, will most certainly influence that future.

Therefore, in presenting a vision of mission in Asia today, there are no doubt significant events, movements, and trends that will be overlooked, but which will eventually shape the future of mission in Asia. Be that as it may, I shall attempt to present a "postmodern vision of mission in Asia today." The term postmodern, and its derivatives postmodernity and postmodernism, are probably among the most misunderstood and most used and abused terms in contemporary academia. One theologian has even suggested that the postmodern "can be used to characterize almost anything one approves or disapproves" for it is "a nearly empty tag." With this caveat in mind, I would like to suggest that the postmodern refers to "the world that has not yet discovered itself in terms of what is but only in terms of what it has just-now-ceased-to-be."

And just what is it that has just now ceased to be? Perhaps the clearest answer to this question has been provided by the Polish sociologist Zygmunt Bauman in his book *Intimations of Postmodernity*. Bauman identifies three characteristics of the postmodern--the decline of the West, the legitimation crisis, and the undeniable reality of pluralism.<sup>3</sup> Let us examine each of these in terms of mission in Asia today beginning with the legitimation crisis, then moving on to the decline of the West, and finally considering the undeniable reality of pluralism. Each of these characteristics of the postmodern will be considered in light of the theme "Grace at the Table." The postmodern, therefore, will be a kind of analytical tool by which we can identify those elements that will in turn define our vision for the future.