

Evangelism in the “Key” of Patronage: Studies in Thai Conversion¹

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Abstract

Western evangelical models of conversion often assume guilt-awareness as the universal, primary entry point to the gospel. Drawing on 18 interviews with Thai Christians converted from Buddhist backgrounds, this study finds instead that conversion for them was frequently catalyzed by experiences of divine benefaction, answered prayer, care, and belonging. Interpreting these narratives through patronage, honor–shame dynamics, and John Barclay’s theology of grace-gift, the article argues that Thai converts encounter God as a benevolent Patron and conversion as relational realignment. Patronage thus provides a culturally coherent and biblically resonant moral grammar for contextualizing evangelism in Thailand and similar Buddhist contexts.

Keywords: benefaction, conversion, patronage, Thailand, Thai Christianity

When the Gospel Is Played in the Wrong Key

Christians’ articulations of the good news are always made in a cultural “key”—the moral and cultural register through which the gospel is heard as addressing the fundamental human problem. There is no culturally neutral rendering of the gospel. Even so, Western Evangelicalism has typically assumed “guilt” to be the universal register for gospel communication, an assumption this study places under ethnographic, anthropological, and theological scrutiny.

Western evangelical theology’s key of guilt is not merely guilt as culpability (“I did something wrong”), but also an emotional reaction, as conveyed by the English term “guilty.” Conversion is expected to begin with an awareness of sin, intensify into moral guilt, and culminate in forgiveness secured through Christ’s atoning work (typically understood in judicial terms). This sequence presumes a particular moral psychology: an introspective self, a juridical imagination, and an understanding of guilt as the primary human problem to which salvation responds (Flanders, 2020, pp. 75-77).

This bundled assumption about the key of guilt has traveled widely, often unexamined, shaping evangelistic practice far beyond the cultural world that gave it birth. When the gospel is proclaimed outside that Western cultural world—especially in Buddhist contexts such as Thailand—it frequently retains the expectations about conversion’s sequence intact. Evangelists anticipate conviction of sin, verbal expressions of guilt, and personal accounts stressing a guilt-laden experience for forgiveness as the hallmarks of authentic conversion. When such markers fail to appear, the conclusion is often swift and uncharitable: The gospel has not yet been understood. Worse, listeners may be judged simply incapable of understanding God’s message of salvation.

This article argues that such judgments reveal less about the gospel’s clarity and more about the cultural specificity of Western conversion models. Drawing on 18 in-depth interviews with Thai Christians who converted from Buddhist backgrounds, I argue that conversion in Thai contexts is often catalyzed not by guilt-awareness but by experiences of divine benefaction. Additionally, I argue that such is not a defective form of conversion, awaiting completion through

guilt-awareness, but rather represents a culturally coherent and biblically resonant reception of the gospel.

These interviews reveal that God is encountered first not as a judge whose moral law has been transgressed but as a powerful, benevolent Patron, who helps, provides, protects, and can be depended upon. Conversion, in turn, is narrated as a relational realignment marked by gratitude, loyalty, and belonging rather than juridical pardon and an experience of guiltiness. When read through the lenses of patronage theory, John Barclay's theology of grace-gift, and honor-shame dynamics, these narratives do not represent a deficient or "thin" Christianity. They represent a culturally coherent reception of incongruous, transformative grace that resonates deeply with both biblical patterns and the moral grammar of Thai society. Put simply, the gospel has not failed to communicate in Thailand. It has often been played in the wrong key. Thus, patronage is not the real problem—unexamined and misunderstood patronage is.

Western Expectations of Conversion and the Grammar of Guilt

The assumption that conversion must be preceded or accompanied by guilt-awareness is neither timeless nor universal. It is the product of a particular Western Christian genealogy, shaped decisively by early modern Protestantism and intensified within evangelical revivalism. Scholars such as Bruce Hindmarsh have demonstrated that by the eighteenth century a relatively stable conversion narrative, which he labeled the "Evangelical conversion narrative," had emerged in Protestant piety: Individuals were expected to undergo a period of deep introspection, recognize their sinfulness, experience acute guilt or despair, and finally receive assurance of forgiveness through Christ (Hindmarsh, 2001, p. 73). This narrative was often associated with the younger son's experience in Jesus's parable of the father and two sons in Luke 15. Forgiveness of sins was assumed to be the central human longing, and guilt-awareness was supposed to be the necessary precondition for conversion.

Western missionaries were therefore often puzzled, and frustrated, when their hearers failed to respond as expected. Early Protestant missionary to Siam, Jesse Caswell, lamented that the Thai mind was "peculiarly unfitted for understanding and embracing the doctrine of the forgiveness of sin through an atonement," capturing this frustration succinctly (Caswell, 1848, p. 16). Caswell's statement has been repeated as evidence of Buddhist resistance to the gospel. Yet it is equally plausible, and arguably more accurate, to read Caswell's analysis as evidence of missionary confusion regarding Thai moral psychology. Philip Hughes's extensive historical study of Northern Thai Christianity documents this pattern of recurring mismatch between missionary expectations and Thai responses to the gospel in remarkable detail (Hughes, 1989). The interviews I have analyzed for this study demonstrate that this pattern persists in contemporary Thailand. Participants rarely described conversion as relief from guilt. Instead, they narrated conversion as an account of a God who demonstrates himself trustworthy by graciously attending to their needs. God's reality was confirmed not through introspective moral crisis but through benefaction.

Ethnographic Findings

The interviews examined in this study offer a contemporary view of this recurring mismatch between Western expectations and Thai experiences of conversion. What emerges is a distinctly relational account of conversion, organized around divine benefaction, trust, belonging, and grateful loyalty rather than guilt and juridical forgiveness.

What Thai Converts Actually Say

Across 18 interviews with Thai Christians who converted from Buddhist backgrounds, a striking convergence emerges. These interviews were intentionally open-ended, inviting participants to narrate their own conversion stories without imposing theological categories, allowing patterns of moral reasoning to emerge inductively rather than being elicited through doctrinal prompts. All interviews were conducted in the Thai language, and all translations into English are mine. When participants were invited to narrate their journeys in their own terms, conversion appeared less as a moment of juridical realization and more as a sequence of relational recognitions. God became real, not primarily because guilt was exposed, but because help was given. The grammar of these narratives is overwhelmingly patronal.

Prayer as the Catalytic Moment

In interview after interview, prayer preceded belief. Sixteen respondents identified a specific answered prayer as decisive. Participants described being encouraged—often gently, sometimes hesitantly—to “ลองอธิษฐานดู” (“try praying and see”). Prayer functioned as relational testing rather than a confession. It was an invitation to test whether the Christian God is attentive, responsive, and capable.

Interviewee Amp recounted: “ก็อธิษฐาน แล้วพระเจ้าก็ตอบคำอธิษฐานจริง ๆ ตอนนั้นแอมก็เริ่มคิดว่าพระเจ้ามีจริง” (“So I prayed, and God really answered the prayer. At that moment I began to think that God is real”). The order is telling. Prayer does not follow belief; belief follows answered prayer. God’s reality is inferred from benefaction. This pattern recurs with remarkable consistency. Interviewee Gift described praying about money and family matters: “พออธิษฐานเรื่องเงิน เรื่องครอบครัว แล้วมันคลี่คลาย เราก็รู้สึกทึ่งว่าพระเจ้าดูแลจริงๆ” (“When I prayed about money and family, and things worked themselves out, I felt that God really takes care of us”). The verb คลี่คลาย (“to unwind” or “to resolve”) emphasizes gradual relief rather than sudden miracle. God’s care was experienced as reliable presence over time.

For others, prayer carried risk precisely because it precedes religious identity. Turian admitted initial fear: “เขาบอกให้ลองอธิษฐานดู ตอนแรกก็กลัว เพราะยังไม่ใช่คริสเตียน แต่พออธิษฐานแล้วมันเกิดขึ้นจริง” (“They told me to try praying. At first I was afraid because I wasn’t a Christian yet, but when I prayed, it really happened”). Prayer here is transgressive—addressing a God one does not yet belong to—yet it becomes the means by which belonging is discerned. The interviews thus reveal prayer not as a spiritual discipline reserved for insiders but as a culturally intelligible mechanism for evaluating a potential Patron. In a moral world shaped by dependence and reciprocity, it makes sense to test whether one who claims power will actually respond to need.

This impulse arguably matches in important respects the Thai indigenous constellation of practices of votive petitioning, vow-making, and ritual petitioning (การบนบานศาลกล่าว—*kāan bōn-bāan sāan-klāao*) with local spirits and deities. These widespread practices operate according to a patron–client relational logic involving petition, votive pledge, and ritual fulfillment. In the context of Thai folk religion, petitioners signal sincerity through conditional pledges that are understood to require fulfillment upon the successful realization of the request. This patronage logic in ritual form takes the following form: Petition → promised return → fulfillment. “By performing a ritual known as a *kāe bōn* [*kāe* means ‘to fulfill,’ and *bōn* means ‘a vow’] individuals or families ask a

spirit for divine intercession in accomplishing a particular task. Supplicants vow an offering in return if the boon is granted by the spirit” (Grow, 1991, p. 49). Such votive vows and petitionary practices are fundamentally relational, not magical. They are typically temporary, ad hoc, and contractual rather than merely symbolic; once made, they are morally binding, not optional. As a whole, such practices point to a spiritual form of durable Thai relational logic.

God as Benevolent Patron: The Language of Care and Dependence

If prayer is the catalytic act, benefaction is the confirming experience. Participants consistently described God using verbs and metaphors associated with patronage: care (ดูแล, *duu læ*), help (ช่วย, *chûai*), provision (ให้, *hâi*), to depend (พึ่ง, *phûng*), and placement under protection (ฝากตัว, *fàak tûa*). Thai historian Rabibhadana introduces this term ฝากตัว (*fàak tûa*) as part of the lexicon of clientship. He glosses it in relation to the act of placing oneself under the protection of a superior and entering a patron–client relationship (Rabibhadana, 1968, p. 94). He also describes the duties of the subordinate in such a relationship: “The behavior a *phūhnōi* should exhibit toward a *phūyai* may be summed up in three words: *khaorop*, *chēūafang*, and *krēngchāi*” (Rabibhadana, 1968, p. 108). These markers of client response to a patron are best translated as “to honor,” “to obey,” and “to give deferential respect.” Interviewee Bay reflected simply: “พระเจ้าดูแลเรามาตลอด ถึงแม้เราจะไม่รู้ตัว” (“God has been taking care of me all along, even when I didn’t realize it”). The temporal framing was retrospective; God’s patronage was recognized after the fact, reinterpreting past experiences through a new lens of care. Un similarly emphasized dependence: “รู้สึกที่พระเจ้าช่วยในเรื่องที่เราไม่สามารถช่วยตัวเองได้” (“I feel that God helps in matters where I cannot help myself”). The admission of vulnerability is central. God’s significance lies precisely in God’s capacity to act where human agency fails.

Several participants described conversion using the idiom *fàak tûa*. Interviewee Tum explained: “มันเหมือนเราฝากชีวิตไว้กับพระเจ้า แล้วไม่ต้องแบกคนเดียว” (“It’s like I placed [*fàak*] my life in God’s hands, and I didn’t have to carry everything by myself anymore”). Tum did not use the full expression *fàak tûa*, but his use of *fàak* invoked the same relational logic of entrusting oneself to another’s care. The image is not contractual but custodial. God assumes responsibility; the convert relinquishes solitary burden. This language aligns closely with everyday Thai social reasoning. To *fàak tûa* with someone is to entrust oneself to the care and protection of one who possesses greater resources, power, or standing. Such entrustment acknowledges asymmetry without implying the surrender of agency. In this sense, patronage provides a morally intelligible means of seeking security amid vulnerability and uncertainty.

Belonging and Filial Identity

While benefaction establishes trust, belonging secures identity. Several participants described conversion in terms of becoming part of a family—specifically, becoming ลูกพระเจ้า (“a child of God”). Oil recounted being told this explicitly: “เขาบอกว่าเราเป็นลูกพระเจ้า เรารู้สึกว่ามีความค่า” (“They told me that we are children of God, and I felt that I have worth”). Worth here is not abstract moral value but socially conferred dignity. To be named as a child is to be given place, protection, and recognition. Amp echoed this same sentiment: “มันไม่ใช่แค่เชื่อศาสนา แต่เหมือนได้เป็นลูก” (“It’s not just believing in a religion; it’s like becoming a child”). Conversion is thus not merely assent to propositions but relocation into a household. This emphasis on family aligns with broader Thai social values, in which belonging and relational security are paramount. Yet it also resonates deeply

with biblical imagery, suggesting that converts are not mishearing the gospel but hearing it through a different—yet faithful—register.

Gratitude, Loyalty, and Būnkhūn

Following benefaction and belonging, a moral response emerged in the responses, namely, gratitude expressed as loyalty. Participants rarely spoke of obligation in legal terms. Instead, they spoke of บุญคุณ (*būnkhūn*), a dense moral concept often translated as “indebted gratitude.” Gift articulated this plainly: “พระเจ้าทำให้เราขนาดนี้ เราก็อยากตอบแทน อยากทำเพื่อพระองค์” (“God has done so much for me, so I want to repay it; I want to do things for Him”).

From a Western perspective, such language can sound alarmingly transactional. Yet within Thai moral reasoning, *būnkhūn* does not necessarily imply anxious repayment. It names the enduring moral bond created by generosity. Gratitude is not a debt to be discharged but a relationship to be honored. Importantly, this loyalty is forward-looking. Participants described changes in daily practice—praying regularly, seeking God’s guidance, participating in Christian community—not as means of securing future benefaction but as fitting responses to care already received.

The Relative Absence of Guilt and Juridical Sin

Perhaps most striking to Western readers is what does not dominate these narratives. Explicit language of guilt, legal guilt, or forgiveness of sins is rare. Only three interviewees mentioned sin or a sense of guilt in their accounts. When asked directly about sin, participants often hesitated or reframed the question. Bay observed: “ไม่ค่อยมีใครพูดเรื่องบาปเท่าไร ส่วนใหญ่พูดว่าพระเจ้ารัก” (“People didn’t really talk much about sin; mostly they talked about God’s love”). Neung recounted an early negative reaction to strong guilt language: “ตอนที่เขามาพูดแรงๆ เรื่องบาป เราไม่ชอบเลย” (“At first, when they spoke very strongly about sin, I really didn’t like it”). Where guilt appears, it is relational rather than juridical. Turian explained: “รู้สึกผิดที่ทำให้พ่อแม่เสียใจ มากกว่ารู้สึกว่าการผิดกฎ” (“I felt guilty for making my parents sad more than for breaking any rule”). Guilt here is interpersonal; it concerns damaged relationships and lost face, not violation of abstract law.

Interviewee Chet captured this distinction succinctly: “เราไม่ได้คิดว่าเราบาปมาก แต่รู้สึกว่าชีวิตมันยังขาดอะไรบางอย่าง” (“I didn’t think I was very sinful; I just felt that something was missing in my life”). The problem to solve is lack, not culpability. The relative absence of guilt language should not be read as moral minimalism among converts, but as evidence that moral failure is being located relationally rather than juridically.

Conversion as Relational Realignment

Taken together, these narratives suggest that conversion in Thai contexts is sometimes best understood as a relational realignment. Trust shifts. Dependence relocates. Loyalty is reoriented. God becomes the primary Patron, the one to whom one turns in crisis, from whom one expects care, and to whom gratitude is owed. This relational focus does not mean that moral transformation was absent from the narratives. Participants described changes in behavior, priorities, and relationships. What was absent is the assumption that such change must be initiated by guilt-awareness. Transformation follows belonging rather than precedes it.

The ethnographic evidence thus complicates frequent Western evangelical assumptions without negating biblical theology. Thai converts are not rejecting sin; they are encountering salvation through a different experiential gateway. The gospel addresses shame, insecurity, and vulnerability before it addresses guilt—and in doing so, it proves itself good news.

Patronage as Human and Biblical Moral Grammar

The ethnographic patterns described above invite a question that is as interpretive as it is theological: What kind of moral world makes these narratives intelligible? The short answer is patronage. But patronage here must be understood neither as corruption nor as cultural deficiency, but as a durable form of moral reasoning that structures relationships wherever power and resources are unevenly distributed. Patronage here is not proposed as a causal explanation for conversion, but as a hermeneutical grammar through which divine action becomes intelligible and trustworthy.

Patronage as Human Moral Infrastructure

Anthropologically, patronage is not merely an economic exchange; it is a relational system governed by expectations of care, loyalty, gratitude, and honor. In Thai society, these dynamics remain visible and linguistically encoded. Terms such as *พึ่ง* (*phûng*, to depend on), *ที่พึ่ง* (*thîi phûng*, a source of refuge), and *ฝากตัว* (*fàak tūa*, to place oneself under another's care) signal neither weakness nor immaturity. Instead, they reflect an honest acknowledgment of vulnerability and an ethically sanctioned way of navigating it. To depend on someone is to enter a moral relationship, not to surrender one's agency entirely. Crucially, patronage systems are sustained not by formal contracts but by ongoing demonstration of benefaction. Patrons must prove themselves worthy of trust by showing care; clients respond not with equivalent repayment but with loyalty, public honor, and enduring gratitude. Failure on either side—neglect by the patron or betrayal by the client—constitutes a moral breach.

Patronage in the Biblical World

What Western missiology often overlooks is the close alignment of this moral logic with the biblical world. Patronage was not peripheral to ancient Mediterranean societies: It was foundational. Social life in the Greco-Roman world was structured by benefaction, obligation, honor, and loyalty. To receive a gift (*charis*, χάρις) was to enter a relationship; to fail to respond appropriately was to incur shame.

Scripture reflects this reality repeatedly. God is described not merely or perhaps even primarily as legislator but as protector, provider, deliverer, and benefactor. Frequent references to God's law in the Hebrew Bible must be understood within this relational, covenantal context rather than through a modern Western legal framework. For example, the Exodus narrative establishes Israel's relationship to God through rescue and relationship (divine patronage) before the law. The psalms repeatedly appeal to God as refuge, fortress, and help in times of trouble. Divine faithfulness is demonstrated through action, and human response is framed as trust, praise, and obedience.

Why Patronage Sounds Suspicious to Modern Western Ears

Western suspicion often conflates two distinct forms of reciprocity. Thai face-expert Larry Persons labels these forms as “instrumental bunkhun” and “affectionate bunkhun” (Persons, 2016, p. 170). Instrumental reciprocity treats benefaction as currency and obedience as payment. Affectionate

reciprocity, by contrast, treats benefaction as identity-forming and loyalty as belonging. The former corrodes grace; the latter is precisely how grace reshapes lives.

Grace, Gift, and Reciprocity

Patronage inevitably raises questions of gift, obligation, and human response. These Thai conversion narratives, therefore, invite close consideration of the theological relationship between divine benefaction and the gratitude, loyalty, and reciprocity it generates.

Barclay, Paul, and Būnkhūn

If patronage provides the moral grammar through which Thai converts interpret their experiences of God, a crucial theological question remains: Does this grammar distort the Christian understanding of grace? John Barclay's work decisively reframes this debate. In *Paul and the Gift*, Barclay demonstrates that ancient discussions of "gift" (*charis*, χάρις) were never concerned with whether gifts created obligations—they always did. The real question was what kind of obligations gifts created and on what basis gifts were given. Barclay identifies multiple "perfections" of grace that different traditions emphasize, arguing that Paul radicalizes grace by perfecting incongruity (the gift is given without regard to the worth of the recipient) and efficacy (the gift actually transforms the recipient), without necessarily perfecting other dimensions such as non-circularity or non-reciprocity (Barclay, 2015, pp. 67–75). This clarification is crucial for interpreting Thai conversion narratives.

Efficacy: Grace that Reorders Life

Paul himself expects transformation as the effect of grace. The call to "walk worthy" (*axios*, ἄξιος) of the calling received does not set merit as a precondition; it names the ethical recalibration that follows gift reception. Worth is not a criterion for receiving grace; it is the shape of life reshaped by grace. Thai narratives reflect this logic with remarkable consistency. Converts do not describe their loyalty as anxious striving to secure continued benefaction. Instead, loyalty emerges as a natural response to having been cared for. The moral sequence moves from benefaction to gratitude to allegiance, as seen in Figure 1:



Figure 1: Pauline and Thai Grace-Produced Transformation

This sequence is not a reversal of grace but its social embodiment.

Būnkhūn and the Moral Weight of Gratitude

The Thai concept of *būnkhūn* provides a crucial cultural analog to Barclay's account of gift reception. *Būnkhūn* names the moral bond created by benefaction, especially benefaction that

cannot be repaid in kind. It carries with it a sense of enduring gratitude and relational obligation, not as a debt to be settled but as a relationship to be honored. Crucially, noted earlier, Thai moral discourse distinguishes between two different forms of *būnkhūn*: instrumental *būnkhūn*, which is transactional and conditional, and affectionate *būnkhūn*, an identity-forming goodness that establishes a bond and shapes loyalty over time.

This distinction mirrors Barclay's theological concern. Grace is distorted not when it generates response but when that response is treated as payment—as though gratitude or loyalty were the currency by which divine favor is purchased or repaid. Thai conversion narratives overwhelmingly reflect affectionate *būnkhūn*. Gratitude functions less as an attempt to repay than as an acknowledgment of relationship. Converts speak of wanting to respond to God not because God demands it, but because the relationship itself calls for such a response. This relational focus helps explain why guilt-language is relatively muted. Guilt presumes a legal frame; *būnkhūn* presumes a relational one. The moral pressure felt by converts is not “I have violated a law” but “I have been cared for, and this relationship matters.” The motivation for obedience is not fear of punishment but concern for honoring the benefactor.

Guardrails, Not Rejection

None of this framework of “grace, gift, and reciprocity” negates the need for theological guardrails. Without careful teaching, patronage logic could slide into a form of instrumentalism. Converts might come to fear that God's care is conditional on performance. These dangers are real, and leaders and missionaries should address such potential pitfalls through discipleship. Yet the solution is not to abandon patronage language or insist on guilt-centered conversion scripts. The solution is to articulate clearly, and repeatedly, the incongruity of God's giving while affirming the efficacy of God's grace. Obedience is not the price of benefaction; it is the form life takes once benefaction has been received. Barclay gives us the tools to make precisely this distinction. Thai moral reasoning provides us with a context in which the distinction can be lived.

Honor, Shame, and Conversion as Honor Relocation

Patronage involves more than benefaction and reciprocal loyalty. It also locates persons within relationships of honor, recognition, and belonging. These Thai conversion narratives thus invite attention not only to what God grants converts, but also to the new social and relational identity they understand themselves to inhabit.

Honor as Belonging and Recognition

Within this moral world of patronage, honor is not primarily about status competition but about secure belonging. To be honored is to be recognized as someone who matters, is cared for, has a place, and is “seen.” When participants describe becoming ลูกพระเจ้า (“children of God”), they are not rehearsing doctrine but narrating honor relocation.

Oil's comment—“เขาบอกว่าเป็นลูกพระเจ้า เรารู้สึกว่ามีคุณค่า” (“They told me that we are children of God, and I felt that I have worth”)—captures this sense of belonging succinctly. Worth is conferred, not achieved. It is bestowed through relationship rather than earned through performance. This relational importance is why community plays such a central role in the Thai conversion narratives informing this study. Belonging is not an abstract theological status but a lived social reality. Being welcomed, remembered, prayed for, and included signals honor restoration in ways that doctrinal

explanation alone cannot. For Thai converts, then, conversion is not merely a change of belief but a change of place. One moves from being alone to being held, from being exposed to being covered, from uncertainty to dependable care. Honor is not claimed; it is given.

Evangelism Reframed: From Courtroom to Household

If Thai conversion is often experienced through benefaction, trust, gratitude, and belonging, these findings have important implications for evangelistic practice. Taking this relational moral grammar seriously requires reconsidering the cultural key in which to communicate the gospel.

Evangelism Begins with Vulnerability and Need, Not Transgression

Western evangelism often begins with legal diagnosis: you have sinned, you are guilty, you need absolution/forgiveness. This approach presumes that guilt is the most salient moral experience and that forgiveness will therefore register as good news. The Thai narratives suggest a different starting point. Here, conversion begins with acknowledged vulnerability, whether stress, fear, loneliness, or lack of support. Evangelism that bypasses these realities to deliver moral indictment is likely unintelligible or, at the very least, unappealing. A patronage- and honor-sensitive evangelism could begin by listening for how people narrate need, help, trust, gratitude, and belonging. Rather than beginning with a predetermined diagnosis of guilt, evangelists might ask questions such as:

- When life becomes difficult, where—or to whom—do you turn for help?
- Who has cared for you in ways you can never fully repay?

This approach does not eliminate sin; it reframes it. Within a patron–client moral framework, sin is not primarily the violation of an impersonal law but a failure of loyal gratitude toward a generous patron. It is a betrayal of relationship—living in ways that dishonor the one whose benefaction sustains life. As Paul writes in Romans 1:21, humanity’s fundamental failure is that “they did not honor him as God or give thanks.” The cardinal vice, in this register, is ingratitude (ἀχαριστία, *acharistia*), the failure to respond appropriately to divine benefaction. In Thai patron–client moral terms, sin is a failure of *būṅkhūn* relationship—a forgetting of benefaction, a refusal of gratitude, and ultimately a betrayal of the patron’s goodness. Sin expresses itself as a life that shames the patron because it is not consistent with the patron’s goodness or gifts.

Certain languages (e.g., Thai, Japanese) contain relatively thin vocabularies for guilt yet possess rich linguistic resources for expressing shame, obligation, and failures of gratitude. In such contexts, sin is readily understood as a breach of relationship: forgetting benefaction/one’s indebtedness (*luum būṅkhūn*—ลืมบุญคุณ), or acting with ingratitude (*òkkàtanyuu*, อกตัญญู). The moral failure is not merely rule-breaking but relational betrayal. In Thai culture, either term involves a strong moral judgment—almost a character indictment.

Prayer Before Belief: Evangelism as Invitation to Test

One of the clearest practical implications of this study concerns prayer. In Western practice, prayer is often reserved for the end of evangelism (“pray this prayer”) or postponed until after conversion. In Thai contexts, prayer functions very differently. It is a means by which people discern whether God is trustworthy.

Encouraging pre-believers to pray is not a theological compromise but a culturally intelligible invitation to test divine patronage. Prayer becomes a low-risk experiment: If God is real, God will respond. Patrons prove themselves through action. In this sense, answered prayer becomes relational disclosure rather than merely doctrinal confirmation.

Community as Embodied Gospel

The interviews also reveal that community is not merely a context for evangelism; it is one of its primary contents. Converts are persuaded not only by what Christians say but by how they live together. Hospitality, persistence, and care make God's patronage visible. This strong community focus challenges individualistic models of evangelism that treat conversion as a private decision triggered by a persuasive argument. In patronage-shaped moral worlds, credibility is communal. People ask not only "Is this message true?" but "What kind of people gather around this God?" Churches, therefore, do not merely support evangelism; they are evangelism when their common life displays care, dignity, and belonging.

God the Father as the Ultimate Patron, Jesus as the Embodied Patron

I have argued elsewhere that the Thai linguistic construction of "God" itself activates patronage dynamics, shaping how people image and live out divine-human relationships. That is, for พระเจ้า (*phrá jâaw*), "patronage connotations are clear and primary. Thus, a critical point to understand is that to invoke God in the Thai language with the typical term for deity, *phrá jâaw*, is to immediately enter into the dynamics of Thai patronage" (Flanders, 2020, p. 81). God is readily perceived as a powerful, benevolent patron who protects, provides, and responds to human need. Thai Christian theology, therefore, need not import patronage as a secondary or syncretistic layer. Rather, it should activate patronage at the level of language itself, structuring divine-human relations in terms of benefaction, gratitude, and loyal response. All of these elements converge christologically. Evangelism that introduces God as patron must introduce Jesus as the embodied expression of that patronage. Jesus does not merely dispense benefaction; he bears cost. He restores honor publicly, absorbs shame willingly, and transforms dependents into family. In this sense, Jesus does not negate patronage logic; he redeems it.

Evangelists should also help seekers move from application to allegiance. Initial requests for divine help, often expressed through votive prayer, should be understood as the beginning of a relationship rather than its conclusion. Evangelists can guide seekers toward a response of gratitude and loyalty that reflects identity transformation rather than repayment. God's gifts awaken awareness of บุญคุณ (*būnkhūn*), which in turn invites กตัญญู (*kàtanyuu*)—grateful loyalty expressed through a new way of life. At the same time, discipleship must guard against instrumental forms of *būnkhūn* that attempt to treat divine favor as transactional. This clarification should become a discipleship issue—but not an evangelism brake.

Evangelism unavoidably employs local moral vocabulary: A crucial lesson from this study is to refrain from using locally formed Western vocabulary in different local settings. In the Thai context, employing local moral vocabulary would include:

- Conversion asฝากตัว (*fàak tūa*)—entrusting oneself into patronage;
- Grace and divine gifts as true, pure, affectionate *būnkhūn* (บุญคุณแท้/บุญคุณบริสุทธิ์);

- Sin as เนรคุณ (*nerākhūn*), the moral failure of neglecting benefaction, acting as if one owes nothing when one very much does;
- Moral failure as ลืมบุญคุณ (*lūm būnkhūn*)—"forgetting benefaction," and อกตัญญู (*òkkàtanyuu*)—ingratitude.

Such language frames conversion not as merely accepting propositions but as entering a relationship of loyal gratitude.

Conclusion: Evangelism Played in the Right Key

Many in the Buddhist world do not first hear the gospel as pardon but as patronage—not as legal acquittal but as dependable divine care. Indeed, some observers have commented that the framework of patronage is in fact the real “key” in which most Thai Christianity plays. As Herbert Swanson notes, “If one listens gently... it eventually becomes clear that Thai Protestants have a theology profoundly grounded in Thai social conceptions, one that takes God to be the church’s Spiritual/Heavenly Patron” (Swanson, 2002, p. 1). Read carefully, Paul also gives us every reason to believe that grace was always meant to sound this way. Future work might explore how guilt language emerges later within Thai Christian discipleship, once belonging and trust are secure, rather than assuming it must precede conversion. The implication of this study’s conversion narratives is that the task of evangelism should not be to force the gospel into a single moral register, but to play it in the key people are already listening for—trusting that the melody of grace will still be unmistakably Christian. Presenting the good news in the key of patronage may lead to clearer understanding, greater cultural connection, and more faithful evangelism.

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