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Signature:

Byung Whun Choi

Date

Growth, Decline, and Transformation of South Korean Protestant Churches

By

Byung Whun Choi

Master of Divinity

Candler School of Theology

Dr. Ellen Ott Marshall
Committee Chair

Dr. Steven J. Kraftchick
Director of General and Advanced Studies

Dr. Ellen Ott Marshall
Committee Member

Dr. L. Wesley de Souza
Committee Member

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By

Byung Whun Choi

Thesis Committee Chair: Ellen Ott Marshall, PhD

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Abstract

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South Korean Protestantism had experienced surprising growth in membership since it was introduced at the end of the nineteenth century. In 1920, the Protestants made up 1.4 percent of the total population. By 1995 Protestantism rapidly increased to 19.7 percent of the population. However, since the mid 1990s most Protestant denominations in South Korea have experienced a decline in membership. According to one survey, the Protestant population in South Korea decreased from 8,760,300 in 1995 to 8,616,000 in 2005. The purposes of this thesis were to analyze the growth and decline of the South Korean Protestant church, investigate the problems that caused the decline of membership, and suggest tasks to transform the churches. For these purposes, in the first chapter, the particular Korean historical contexts in which the growth and decline of Protestant churches that took place were analyzed. In the second chapter, three factors in the South Korean Protestant churches—church growth syndrome, church individualism, and conservative theology were discussed. Next, problems caused by these three factors and their roots were explored. Lastly, in the third chapter, four tasks to transform South Korean Protestant churches were suggested to move beyond these problems.

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CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION	1
CHAPTER 1.	
History of the Church Growth Declination in South Korean Protestant Churches	4
A. Introduction	4
B. Six Periods of the Korean Protestant Church History	5
1. 1884-1893	5
2. 1894-1904	7
3. 1905-1945	10
4. 1945-1960	11
5. 1960s-1990s	14
6. 1990s-2000s	20
C. Conclusion	22
CHAPTER 2.	
Investigation the Problems in South Korean Protestant Churches	24
A. Introduction	24
B. Three Factors of the South Korean Protestant Churches	25
1. Church Growth Syndrome	25
2. Church Individualism	34
3. Conservative Theology	44
C. Conclusion	49
CHAPTER 3.	
Transforming South Korean Protestant Churches.....	52
A. Introduction	52
B. Four Tasks to Transform the South Korean Protestant Churches.....	52
1. Having New Ecclesial Models.....	52
2. Having Principles of Interdependence and Partnership.....	55
3. Integration between Proclamation of the Gospel and Social Responsibility.....	56
4. Changing Church Growth Pattern from Quantity-Oriented to Quality-Oriented.....	59
C. Conclusion	60
CONCLUSION.....	62
BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	63

ILLUSTRATIONS

Tables

1. Mission Schools (1886-1890).....	7
2. Protestant Population in Korea (1920-1995).....	16
3. South Korean Protestantism, the Least Attractive and Trustworthy Religion.....	22

Figure

1. Numbers of Baptized Members of the Presbyterian Church in Korea.....	9
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INTRODUCTION

South Korean Protestant churches had surprisingly grown in membership after Protestantism was introduced at the end of the nineteenth century. In 1920, the Protestant population was 323,574, about 1.4 percent of the population. Then, the Protestant population increased to 507,922 in 1940, and to 623,072 in 1960. By 1985, the Protestant population rapidly increased to 6,489,282, which is 16.1 percent of the population. By 1995, it was 8,760,000, which is 19.7 percent of the population.¹ This rapid growth in South Korea surprised the Christian church throughout the world. As a result, even though Methodism began in England, the largest Methodist Church in the world is in Seoul, South Korea; Presbyterianism began in Geneva, Switzerland, but the largest Presbyterian Church in the world is in Seoul, South Korea; and Pentecostalism as a modern movement began in Southern California, the United States of America, but the largest Pentecostal Church in the world is in Seoul, South Korea.²

This dramatic growth of the South Korean Protestant churches was regarded as the emergence of the “Third Church” as Walbert Buhmann used in his book *The Coming of the Third Church*.³ Buhmann has distinguished three churches in church history. According to Buhmann, the “First Church” is the Greek Orthodox Church. This Church reflects certain aspects of the structures of the ancient church with its strong autonomous

¹ Young-Gi Hong, “Revisiting Church Growth in Korean Protestantism,” *International Review of Mission* 89, no. 353 (2000): 190.

² Samuel Hugh Moffett, “Has Christianity Failed in Asia?” *The Princeton Seminary Bulletin* ns 26 no. 2 (2005): 207.

³ Walbert Buhmann, *The Coming of Third Church: An Analysis of the Present and Future of the Church* (New York: Orbis Books, 1977).

patriarchates and emphasis on Christian mysticism.⁴ However, the “First Church” has refused to renew its liturgy and clerical structures, leaving it in a state of spiritual isolation. Buhmann portrays the First Church as “the morning star.”⁵ It represents all the churches of silence, unable to cope with historical change.

The “Second Church,” described by Buhmann, is the church of Europe and North America. This church has dominated the world, and in many ways it can be viewed as a mother who has brought forth “offspring in the new world.”⁶ However, the Second Church in the institutional aspects has lost both spiritual dynamism and church membership. Buhmann portrays this Church as the “moon,” which, “after a night almost luminous as the day,” is now growing dim.⁷

The “Third Church” is the church appearing and growing in Asia, Africa, Oceania and South America. The uniqueness of the Third Church is that it “is present in the zone of hunger, disease and desperation, not in order to exacerbate this desperation but in order to transform it in the hope of Easter.”⁸ This Church is portrayed as “the sun, newly risen on the horizon, ruling the day.”⁹ The era of rapid growth in South Korean Protestant churches was a time of decline for Europe and the North American churches, which are the Second Church. It represented the moving from the Second Church to the Third Church in Buhmann’s terms. Thus, the South Korean Protestant churches were hailed by the world Christian community as the Third Church for the future.¹⁰

⁴ Ibid., 9.

⁵ Ibid., 24.

⁶ Ibid., 4.

⁷ Ibid., 17, 24.

⁸ Ibid., 94.

⁹ Ibid., 24.

¹⁰ Joon Kwan Un, “After Church Growth in Korea: Search for an Alternative Ecclesial Model,” *International Journal of Practical Theology*, 1 no 1 (1997): 164.

However, recent situations of the South Korean Protestant churches break this expectation for the appearance of the Third Church in South Korea. Since the mid 1990s most Protestant denominations in South Korea have experienced a decline in membership.¹¹ According to one survey, the Protestant population in South Korea decreased from 8,760,300 in 1995 to 8,616,000 in 2005.¹² The South Korean Protestant Church stands in an ambiguous position between the Third Church and the Second Church as Walbert Buhlmann portrays.

The purpose of this thesis is to analyze the growth and decline of the South Korean Protestant churches in the history of Korean Christianity, investigate the problems that cause the decline of membership, and suggest tasks to transform the churches. For this purpose, I will firstly discuss the particular Korean historical contexts in which the growth and decline of Protestant churches took place. Next, I will discuss three factors in the South Korean Protestant churches—church growth syndrome, church individualism, and conservative theology. Then, I will investigate problems caused by these three factors and explore the roots of these factors. Lastly, I will suggest four tasks to transform South Korean Protestant churches and to move beyond the problems.

¹¹ Hong, "Revisiting Church Growth in Korean Protestantism," 190.

¹² Gallup Korea, "Koreans' Religions," Gallup Korea, <http://www.gallup.co.kr> (accessed December 12, 2010).

CHAPTER 1

History of the Church Growth and Declination in South Korean Protestant Churches

A. Introduction

After Protestantism was introduced in Korea in 1884, Korean Protestantism experienced exceptional growth. A recent government statistic shows that more than 18 percent of the population in South Korea is Protestant.¹³ In 2010, South Korean Protestant churches sent 20,445 missionaries to one hundred and sixty nine countries throughout the world.¹⁴ South Korea is one of the most Christianized countries in the non-Western world.

Throughout the Western colonial era, Christianity, including both Protestantism and Catholicism, met strong resistance from non-Western countries.¹⁵ People in non-Western countries were hostile to Christian missionaries because they had played a role as agents between Western colonial countries and non-Western countries. However, unlike other non-Western countries, Protestantism in Korea experienced remarkable growth. After Protestantism was introduced in Korea in the end of the nineteenth century, Protestantism continued to grow for over 100 years, until the end of the twentieth century. However, after a century of remarkable growth, South Korean Protestant churches have been experiencing declining membership since mid 1990s.

¹³ National Statistical Office, *Religion Population in South Korea in 2005* (Seoul: National Statistical Office, 2005), 12. According to this statistics, there were 10,720,000 Buddhists, 8,610,000 Protestants, and 5,140,000 Catholics in South Korea. Buddhists are 22.8 percent; Protestants are 18.3 percent; and Catholics are 10.9 percent of the total population in South Korea.

¹⁴ Korean World Mission Associate, "Korean Missionaries in the World in 2010," Korean World Mission Association, <http://www.kwma.org> (accessed January 23, 2011).

¹⁵ Chung-Sin Park, *Protestantism and Politics in Korea* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2003), 13.

In this chapter, I will discuss the particular Korean historical contexts in which the growth and decline of Protestant churches took place. To do so, I will divide the Korean Protestant church history into six periods: (1) The acceptance of Protestantism in Korea (1884-1893); (2) The remarkable growth of Protestantism in Korea (1894-1904); (3) The growth of Korean Protestant churches during the colonial period (1905-1945); (4) The growth in South Korean Protestant churches during the Korean War and later (1945-1960); (5) Rapid modernization in South Korea and the explosive growth of South Korean Protestant churches (1960s-1990s); and (6) The decline of South Korean Protestant churches (1990s-2000s).

B. Six Periods of the Korean Protestant Church History

1. The Acceptance of Protestantism in Korea, 1884-1893

The first Protestant missionary in Korea was Horace N. Allen from the United States. Allen arrived in 1884 to convert Koreans into Protestantism.¹⁶ It was eight years after the opening of Korea by Japan in 1876 and two years after the beginning of diplomatic relations with the United States in 1882.¹⁷ When Protestant missionaries came to Korea in 1884, Korea had anti-Western and anti-Christian attitudes as most non-Western countries did in the colonial era.¹⁸ In particular, anti-Western and anti-Christian attitudes in Korea were caused by Catholicism and the aggressive activities of Western warships. First, Catholicism caused anti-Western and anti-Christian attitudes in Korea. Catholicism was introduced in Korea through China in 1770 before Protestantism arrived. A small number of Koreans from China first introduced Catholicism to Korea. Then,

¹⁶ Jung-Min Suh, *History of Korean Protestant Church* (Seoul: Salim Press, 2003), 12.

¹⁷ Park, *Protestantism and Politics in Korea*, 17.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 19

many Catholic priests from Western countries came to Korea, and they converted a lot of Koreans to Catholicism.¹⁹ However, the Korean government persecuted Catholicism because Catholic converts challenged the Confucian foundation that was the primary system of belief in Korea. For instance, many Korean Catholics refused to do *ancestor worship*, which had great influence on the lives of the everyday Korean people, many of whom performed rituals in order to pay respect to one's ancestors.²⁰ Therefore, the attitude of Catholics against traditional Korean culture caused an intense persecution of Catholic converts and anti-Christian attitudes in Korea.²¹

Second, aggressive activities of Western warships caused anti-Western and anti-Christian attitudes in Korea. These Western warships appeared on the shores of Korea to demand the opening of trade and explanations for the persecution of Catholic converts.²² For instance, in 1866, a French warship invaded *Ganghwa* Island in Korea to retaliate for the earlier execution of Western priests and Korean Catholic converts. This event is called "The French Campaign against Korea of 1866" or *Byeong-In Yangyo* (Western disturbance of the *byeong-in* year).²³ The encounter, which lasted nearly six weeks, was the first armed encounter between Korea and a Western power.²⁴

¹⁹ Suh, *History of Korean Protestant Church*, 4

²⁰ Ancestor worship in Korea was influenced by Confucianism and Shamanism. When this worship first started is unknown, but historians trace it way back near the end of the 800s. In the Korean ancestral belief system, there are two types of spirits, namely the good or benign ancestor and the evil spirit or ghost. A spirit becomes either one of these spirits by the manner of their deaths. Evil spirits or ghosts are created when people die either by suicide or by an accident, usually outside the home, who then go on to haunt the world and perform malicious acts. A benevolent spirit was produced when someone died of natural causes in the home after a long life; the spirits of these individuals would then become the ancestor spirits who would protect their descendants and families. For more information, see Roger L. Janelli's *Ancestor Worship and Korean Society* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1982).

²¹ Park, *Protestantism and Politics in Korea*, 18.

²² *Ibid.*, 19

²³ Carter J. Eckert, *Korea Old and New: A History* (Seoul: Ilchokak Publishers, 1991), 121.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

Under these anti-Western and anti-Christianity circumstances, Allen and the other Protestant missionaries could not openly and easily preach their religion to Koreans. Thus, Allen introduced himself to King *Kojong*²⁵ not as a missionary but as a doctor from the United States.²⁶ Instead of directly preaching Protestantism in Korea, Protestant missionaries built hospitals and schools for mission (See Table 1).²⁷ These modern hospitals and schools became the places where Protestant missionaries could meet Koreans and introduce Protestantism to Koreans. Through the modern medical treatment and education in Korea, the early Protestant missionaries began to establish a good image among Koreans.²⁸ With hospitals and schools, Protestant missions grew slowly but stably until the mid-1890s.

Table 1.
Mission Schools (1886-1890)

Year	Name	Founding Denomination	Place
1886	Baejae	Methodist	Seoul
1886	Ewah	Methodist	Seoul
1886	Kyungsin	Presbyterian	Seoul
1890	Chongsin	Presbyterian	Seoul

2. The Remarkable Growth of Protestantism in Korea, 1894-1904

Protestantism in Korea sharply grew after the mid-1890s, as Figure 1²⁹ shows.

As shown above, there were four mission schools founded by Protestant missionaries

²⁵ King *Kojong* (1852-1919) was the 26th monarch of the *Choson* (Yi) dynasty and the last to effectively rule Korea.

²⁶ Park, *Protestantism and Politics in Korea*, 18.

²⁷ Kwang-min Yi, *Roundtable Discussions of Korean History*, (Seoul: Ilchogak, 1983), 543.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 22.

²⁹ Roy E. Shearer, *Wildfire: Church Growth in Korea* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans

from 1884 to 1893. On the other hand, from 1894 to 1904, nineteen mission schools were opened throughout the country.³⁰ There were three reasons why Protestantism rapidly grew during this period. The first one was Western Protestant missionaries' favorable image to Koreans. At the beginning of Protestantism in Korea, missions through hospitals and schools made Koreans have good images of Protestantism.

The second one was the adoption of the Nevius Method, which emphasized self-support, self-propagation, self-government and independence of the church.³¹ This method was not popular either in China and Japan, but it was widely accepted by the missionaries of the Northern Presbyterian Church in Korea after Dr. Nevius visited Seoul and taught it to them in 1890. The method laid great stress on a curriculum for the Bible study, the church's self-determination, and the need for native to carry on the evangelical work.³² According to W. N. Blair, "more than anything else, Bible classes accounted for the rapid growth and revival of Korean Protestant churches."³³ The early Korean Protestants enjoyed attending Bible classes and conferences, lasting from four to ten days, and held annually in most churches.³⁴

The third one was Korea's national crisis among superpower countries such as China, Russia, and Japan. The Sino-Japanese War³⁵ caused a sense of national crisis

Publishing Co., 1966), 51.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Changdae Gwak, "Ecclesiology and Membership Trends in the South Korean Churches" (ThD dissertation, University of Stellenbosch, 2000), 19.

³² Andrew. E. Kim, "A History of Christianity in Korea: From its troubles beginning to its contemporary success," *Korea Journal* 35:2, 39.

³³ Ibid., 40.

³⁴ Boo Woong Yoo, "Korean Pentecostalism: Its history and theology" (PhD dissertation, Birmingham University, 1987), 45.

³⁵ The Sino-Japanese War (1894–95) was a conflict between Japan and China that marked the emergence of Japan as a major world power and demonstrated the weakness of the Chinese empire.

among Koreans.³⁶ This war was meaningful to Koreans because the war destroyed the China-centric order in Korea and allowed Japan to become the leading superpower in East Asia.³⁷ Moreover, Japan's victory in the Russo-Japanese War³⁸ made Koreans expect that Japan would invade weak Korea in the near future. Thus, Koreans were afraid of this international crisis, so they needed any support they could find. Koreans thought that the best support was the Western countries and Protestantism.³⁹ In addition to people, King Kojong and his officers also began to think that the United States was the only country to defend Korea from Japanese power.⁴⁰ Lillias H. Underwood, an American missionary, explained the circumstance after Sino-Japanese War:

The favor with which all Americans were regarded by Korean authorities...[was] due perhaps to the fact that we belong to a large and powerful nation which had no object in interfering in Eastern politics in any way to the detriment of Korea, and which might become an efficient ally and defender.⁴¹

Under these circumstances, Protestantism was rapidly growing in Korea.

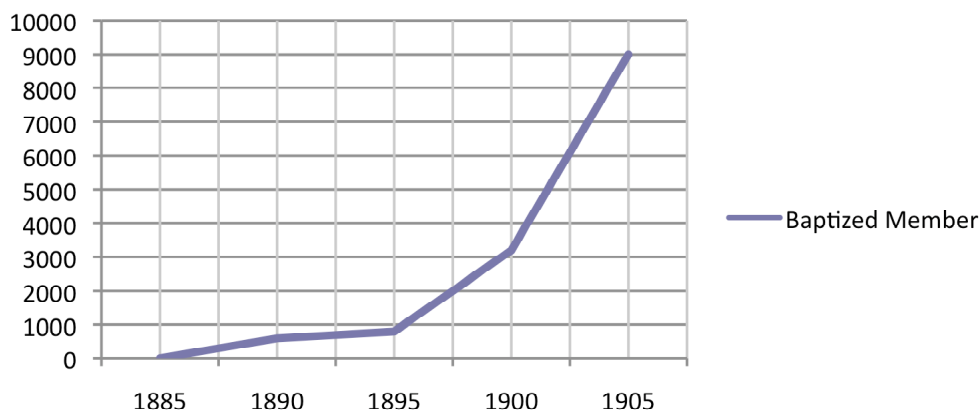


Figure 1. Numbers of Baptized Members of the Presbyterian Church in Korea (1885-1905)

³⁶ Park, *Protestantism and Politics in Korea*, 24.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ The Russo-Japanese War (1904-1905) was a conflict, which grew out of the rival imperial ambitions of the Russian Empire and Japanese Empire over Manchuria and Korea.

³⁹ Park, *Protestantism and Politics in Korea*, 25.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Lillias H. Underwood, *Fifteen Years among the Topknots of Life in Korea* (Boston, New York, and Chicago: American Tract Society, 1904), 28.

3. The Growth of Korean Protestant Churches during the Colonial Period, 1905-1945

In 1905, Japan forced a treaty that made Korea its protectorate. Then in 1910, a treaty of annexation was signed that made Korea part of the Japanese empire.⁴² In this tragic, historic situation, more and more Korean people converted to Protestantism.⁴³ The main reason for the large rate of conversion was that the Korean people expected to gain strength from the Protestant faith so as to be able to survive under the domination of an alien power. Cornelius Osgood explains the international situation in which the Japanese annexed Korea:

Japan had secured herself from outside interference first by her defeat of China, then by a military alliance with the British, who wanted a counterbalance against Russia in the East, and lastly by a stinging victory over the latter nation. The United States, on whom the Koreans depended most, was blocked from giving any diplomatic aid by the personal prejudice of President Theodore Roosevelt.⁴⁴

Unfortunately, the government of the United States decided not to intervene between Japan and Korea. Thus, at that time, the Korean people had to struggle against the Japanese without any help from international society. Therefore, Japan could push her plan, step by step, in that situation. Osgood also says that,

The major moves in the peninsula consisted of forcing the Korean emperor to relinquish his authority to Marquis Ito as resident-general on Nov. 17, 1905, and finally to abdicate in favor of his feeble-minded son on July 19, 1907. The child of tragedy approved the annexation of his country to Japan, which was proclaimed August 29, 1910.⁴⁵

Meanwhile, during this tragic period, a religious revival movement prevailed in Protestant churches across Korea. A nationwide campaign of revival meetings, conducted

⁴² Eckert, *Korea Old and New: A History*, 125.

⁴³ Shearer, *Wildfire: Church Growth in Korea*, 53-54.

⁴⁴ Cornelius Osgood, *The Koreans and Their Culture* (New York: Ronald Press, 1951), 279.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

independently or jointly by churches and denominations, began in 1907.⁴⁶ For instance, the Southern Methodist Mission planned to evangelize further with the slogan, “A million souls for Christ.” This great evangelical work was held in 1909.⁴⁷ Preachers argued from the pulpit that the humiliating loss of national independence was brought on by Koreans themselves.⁴⁸ In other words, Korea had sinned as a nation, so independence would not be regained until Korea repented its sins. Korean Protestants blamed not the Japanese, but themselves first.

The revival movement abandoned “political affairs” such as the immediate national liberation, and instead limited itself to work for personal salvation. It thus tended to be futuristic transcendental and mystical.⁴⁹ It means that the activities in the Protestant churches were not seen as outwardly political, but inwardly religious. For instance, the preachers in the revival meetings talked about some indefinite future, not the “here and now.”⁵⁰ In spite of the intention of the missionaries and the seemingly apolitical nature of the revival movement, these geo-political events produced an unintended expansion of Protestantism in Korea.⁵¹

4. The Growth of South Korean Protestant Churches during the Korean War and Later, 1945-1960

After the defeat of Japan in 1945, the U. S. and the USSR entered Korea in order to enforce the surrender of the Japanese forces. For military convenience, Korea was

⁴⁶ Park, *Protestantism and Politics in Korea*, 31.

⁴⁷ Allen D. Clark, *History of the Korean Church* (Seoul: Christian Literature Society, 1961), 143.

⁴⁸ Park, *Protestantism and Politics in Korea*, 31.

⁴⁹ Man-Yeol Lee, *An Essay on the Korean Christianity* (Seoul: Reading Bible Press, 1985), 173-174.

⁵⁰ Park, *Protestantism and Politics in Korea*, 31.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 32.

divided into two parts at the 38th parallel of latitude. Even though the division was intended as a temporary one, this division has now become permanent. The Korean people were liberated from Japanese domination for nearly forty years. However, this liberation did not depend on the Koreans themselves, but depended on the victory in war of the stronger nations. Thus, the Koreans could not avoid a tragic new bondage, which soon divided the country into two parts.

During this tragic period of division, a significant change occurred in the history of Protestantism in Korea. There was an explosive growth in Protestant Churches in the south, whereas the religious community existed only by name in the north, despite the fact that it had been quite strong before the liberation of 1945.⁵² In the south, the division caused the church's explosive growth because under the U. S. military government the south had a favorable social and political atmosphere for Protestantism.⁵³

In contrast, Protestant churches in the north had to struggle against the communists. The USSR, ideologically hostile to religion, held a strong antipathy toward the Korean Protestant community in the north, because the USSR thought that the Protestantism in Korea had been promoted by the U. S.⁵⁴ Thus, communists would interrupt whenever the Protestants tried to have a Sunday worship service in the north.⁵⁵

Under this circumstance, the Korean War broke out in June of 1950. The War led a lot of Protestants in the north to the south to have religious freedom.⁵⁶ In October of that year, when the Korean communists had to withdraw from Pyongyang and from the attacks of the United Nations forces, they killed many of the Protestant pastors and lay

⁵² Ibid., 39.

⁵³ Park, *Protestantism and Politics in Korea*, 40.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 41.

⁵⁵ Clark, *History of the Korean Church*, 214.

⁵⁶ Suh, *History of Korean Protestant Church*, 77.

leaders.⁵⁷ Whatever caused the conflict and the religious persecution, it produced a huge religious migration of Protestants from the north to the south that peaked during the war of 1950-1953.⁵⁸ According to a data of Institute of Korean Christianity, the number of baptized adherents in the Presbyterian churches in the south grew from 14,818 in 1948 to 40,781 in 1958.⁵⁹ The church membership in the south was also increased by around 300 percent from 1948 to 1958.⁶⁰ It means that a lot of Protestants in the north joined the churches in the south.

In addition to the infusion of the Protestants from the north, many South Koreans, who wished to join a religion, chose the Protestant church over other religions because, after the Korean War, the U. S.'s rehabilitation for South Korea strengthened not only U. S. influence but also a pro-Protestantism atmosphere.⁶¹ Moreover, the Protestant church attracted South Koreans by providing a tremendous amount of material relief after the war. In particular, South Korean Protestant churches received and distributed money and goods from Protestant churches in the United States. For instance, the Methodist Church received some \$120,000 in cash by the end of 1951 for relief.

Therefore, South Korean Protestant churches were decisively influenced by the U. S. churches and their missionaries in this period.⁶² The American missionaries deeply planted anti-communism and pro-Americanism in South Korean Protestant churches. The auspices of the U. S. also influenced the South Korean government's decisions on

⁵⁷ Clark, *History of the Korean Church*, 218.

⁵⁸ Park, *Protestantism and Politics in Korea*, 41.

⁵⁹ Han guk Kidokkyo sahoe munje yon guwon, *Hanguk Kyohoe Paengnyon Chonghan Chosa Yongu* (Seoul: Han guk Kidokkyo sahoe munje yon guwon, 1964), 139-140.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² In-Cheol Kang, *Korean Christianity, Nation-state, and Civil Society: 1945-1960* (Seoul: Institute of Korean Christianity History, 1996), 270-274

religious matters.⁶³ Moreover, the U. S. churches and their missionaries helped South Korean Christian elites to hold political power. Thus, the churches remained loyal to the government. In other words, most South Korean Protestant churches maintained a conservative political position.⁶⁴

Furthermore, the American missionaries who were in the highest positions in the church power structure, by providing financial resources for the South Korean Protestant churches, controlled all spheres of church structure and activities.⁶⁵ For instance, these missionaries were deeply involved in theological education so that they implemented their particular theological transitions, such as theological exclusivism, denominationalism, and religious triumphalism.⁶⁶ They governed the planning of church activities such as evangelism and social ministries. They also drove out anti-Americanists and religious nationalists from Protestant churches in South Korea. Therefore, the powerful intervention of the U. S. Protestant churches and missionaries encouraged South Korean Protestant churches to establish the following socio-political tradition, anti-communist, pro-American, and pro-government.⁶⁷ South Korean Protestant churches have had continuously these traditions until today.⁶⁸

5. Rapid Modernization in South Korea and The Explosive Growth of South Korean Protestant Churches, 1960s-1990s

⁶³ Ibid., 273.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 274.

⁶⁵ Jung Suck Rhee, *A Study of Karl Barth's Doctrine of Sanctification and Its Contextual Application to the Korean Church* (Amsterdam: Free University Press, 1995), 309-310.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 309.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 310.

⁶⁸ Gwak, "Ecclesiology and Membership Trends in the South Korean Churches," 32.

Koreans were politically oppressed and economically poor under Japanese power (1910-1945) and they experienced extreme poverty and a harsh life during the Korean War and later (1950-1960). The social disorder of the 1950s after the Korean War stimulated South Korean people to long for the strong power of the nation-state. Most people thus welcomed the military coup by General Park Chung-Hee in May 1960. Park who had been inaugurated as president in December 1963, promoted the power of his military regime by means of an anti-Communist ideology on the one hand, and a growth-centered economic policy on the other hand. The two policies fulfilled the people's expectation of security and material richness to some extent. Unfortunately, Park indulged his insatiable appetite for power into a prolonged dictatorship until he was assassinated in 1979. The military government continued under President Jun Doo-Hwan and Ro Tae-Woo until the early 1990s.⁶⁹

In dictatorship and the military governments, South Koreans made rapid economic progress. South Korea's economic growth was remarkable. The gross national product (GNP) had increased by an average of 9 percent per year since 1962, from \$2 billion in 1962 to \$276.8 billion in 1992, by which point Korea ranked thirteen in the world in terms of its GNP, according to the International Monetary Fund (IMF) statistics. Other indicators tell the same story: the GNP per capita grew from \$87 to \$6749 in the same period. The gross national income (GNI) increased from \$252.3 billion in 1990 to \$474.0 billion in 1997, while the GNI per capita grew from \$5886 to \$10307 in the same period.⁷⁰

⁶⁹ Ibid., 33.

⁷⁰ National Statistical Office, *Social Indicators in Korea* (Seoul: National Statistical Office, 1999), 530.

Table 2. Protestant Population in Korea (1920-1995)

Year	Protestant Population in Korea	Percent of Korean Population (%)
1920	323,574	1.4
1945	507,922	2.0
1960	623,072	2.5
1985	6,489,282	16.1
1995	8,760,300	19.7

In this period, South Korean Protestant churches also were in the phase of an explosive quantitative growth.⁷¹ Protestant population in South Korea increased to 507,922 in 1945 to 623,072 in 1960. By 1985, the Protestant population had strikingly increased to 6,489,282, or 16.1 percent of the population in South Korea. In 1995, it was 8,760,000, or 19.7 percent of the population (See Table 2).⁷²

What caused this continuation of the explosive growth of Protestantism? There were two factors. First of all, *Kiboksinang* (or the prosperity gospel) was highly instrumental in Protestant development from the 1960s to 1990s, and led to quantitative growth in the number of churches and believers.⁷³ *Kiboksinang* means that God will support everything required for better life, namely being blessed in this life. Thus, the blessing means successful life in this world, and all blessings are connected to material well-being as well as physical well-being.⁷⁴ This type of belief shows how capitalistic concerns impinge on South Korean Protestantism. For instance, Yong-Gi Cho of the

⁷¹ Jang, "The Rapid Growth of Christianity in Korea and the Emergence of Cultural Hybridity within it," 48.

⁷² Young-Gi Hong, "Revisiting Church Growth in Korean Protestantism," 190. Statistics from 1945 refer to South Korea only.

⁷³ Jang, "The Rapid Growth of Christianity in Korea and the Emergence of Cultural Hybridity within it," 49.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

*Yoido Full Gospel Church*⁷⁵ preaches and teaches three-fold blessings, which consist of salvation for spirits, health for the body, and prosperity for general life, based on “Dear friend, I pray that you may enjoy good health and that all may go well with you, even as your soul is getting along well” (3 John 2, NIV).⁷⁶ Cho understands that the fundamental desire of God toward those who worship God is spiritual blessing, material success in this world, and the health of mind and body; in other words, well-being in all aspects of human life.⁷⁷

In this period, *kiboksinang* was related to the social context in South Korea. Even though South Koreans made rapid economic progress, many South Koreans suffered feelings of deprivation, alienation, and insecurity.⁷⁸ South Koreans desired more possessions for the sake of future security. Such a desire to possess created in people a sense of relative deprivation through comparison with others who enjoyed higher status or living standards, or by being disappointed in their desires. Furthermore, conflicts amongst people were deepened by distributive inequality.⁷⁹ On the basis of the idea of deprivation compensation, Won Gyu Lee contents that those who were economically-deprived in society found the Protestant church to be a place where they could be compensated through the prospect of material blessings.⁸⁰ Min Kyeong-Bae also states, “people were desperately looking for a way to meet their material needs as well as

⁷⁵ *Yoido Full Gospel Church* is a Pentecostal church on Yeouido (Yoi Island) in Seoul, South Korea. With about 1,000,000 members (2007), it is the largest Christian congregation in South Korea, and the world. Founded and led by Yong-Gi Cho since 1958, it is an internationally visible manifestation of Korean Christianity.

⁷⁶ Jang, “The Rapid Growth of Christianity in Korea and the Emergence of Cultural Hybridity within it,” 49-50.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ Chi-Jun Noh, *Sociology in Korean Protestantism* (Seoul: Hanul, 1998), 21.

⁷⁹ Ibid., 19-20

⁸⁰ Won Gyu Lee, *The Reality and Prospect of the Korea Church* (Seoul: Sungsu Y ongusa, 1994), 180.

seeking the eternal kingdom in the reality of the present situation.”⁸¹ Thus, *Kiboksinang* was strongly active in consequence of the South Korean modernization, and was particularly biased towards rapid economic development involved with industrialization and urbanization since the 1960s.⁸²

Second, Fuller Church Growth Movement affected the church growth during this period in the South Korean Protestant churches. After McGavran and Wagner’s books of Fuller Church Growth Theory were translated into South Korean in 1970s, most of the South Korean Protestant church leaders had enthusiastically learned and practiced Fuller Church Growth Theory. Thus, the South Korean Protestant churches had held a lot of evangelism rallies based on Fuller Church Growth Movement. These events, held throughout the 1970s, included the Billy Graham Evangelism Conference (1973), the Total Military Evangelization Movement (from the early 1970s), Explore 74 (1974), the Holy Assembly of the Nation (1977), World Evangelization Crusade (1980) and Protestant Centenary Celebration (1984). For instance, in August 1984, the Protestant Centenary Celebration drew about 3.5 million Protestants to a number of rallies to hear sermons by well-known world Christian leaders, including Billy Graham.⁸³ These rallies continued into the early 1990s.⁸⁴

In addition, during this rapid industrialization, unbalanced economic growth, urbanization, and domination by dictatorial regimes, the South Korean Protestant churches had remained apolitical. Rather, the South Korean Protestant churches had

⁸¹ Sebastian C.H. Kim, “The Problem of Poverty in Post-War Korean Christianity: *Kibock Sinang* or *Mingjung Theology*?” *Transformation* 24 (2007): 43.

⁸² Jang, “The Rapid Growth of Christianity in Korea and the Emergence of Cultural Hybridity within it,” 50.

⁸³ Kim, “A History of Christianity in Korea: From its troubles beginning to its contemporary success,” 48.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

stressed apolitical teaching and programs such as Bible study, revival meetings, and dawn and overnight prayer meetings. Along with *kiboksinang* and Fuller Church Growth Movement during this period, this apolitical stance allowed the Protestant churches to experience rapid numerical growth. Indeed, today South Korea has 10 churches among top 20 biggest Protestant churches in the world in terms of church members.⁸⁵

However, not all Korean Protestant churches in this period remained apolitical.⁸⁶ For instance, there are liberal Protestant churches based on *Minjung* theology⁸⁷ in South Korea. These liberal churches are dealing with social issues such as human rights for the poor and the oppressed, and governmental authoritarianism. Won Gyu Lee also argues that those who were political-deprived in the process of social change found the Church to be a place where they could receive engage in expression through political activists, such as the human rights movement and the anti-government movement.⁸⁸ However, these liberal churches could not grow as much as mainline churches. For instance, the mainline Protestant denominations such as the Presbyterian Church (*Hapdong*) that were apolitical grew impressively—by over 100 percent from 530,600 members in 1970 to 1,090,309 in 1979 while a liberal church group like the Presbyterian Church (*Kijang*)

⁸⁵ Jaehoon Kim, “20 Biggest Church in the World,” *Segye newspaper*, October 22, 1993. According to the article, among 20 biggest churches (memberships) 10 churches are in Korea. Followings are ten Korean Protestant mega churches among 20 biggest churches in the world. 1) Yeoido Full-Gospel Central Church (1,000,000), 2) Aayang Full-Gospel Church (105,000), 7) Gumran Methodist Church (50,000), 9) Incheon Sungei Methodist Church (48,000), 10) Juan Presbyterian Church (42,000), 11) Sungrak Baptist Church (30,000), 12) Gwanglim Methodist Church (30,000), 13) Yongrak Presbyterian Church (22,000), 15) Heasung Presbyterian Church (23,000), 16) Somang Presbyterian Church (22,000).

⁸⁶ Jang, “The Rapid Growth of Christianity in Korea and the Emergence of Cultural Hybridity within it,” 50.

⁸⁷ The *Minjung* theology is the contextual theology of Korea's socio-economic and political situation during the 1970s. It witnessed the repressed and exploited life of the people at the hand of an unjust regime, and strove to listen to the cry of the people as if to the cry of God. Thus in *Minjung* theology, the common people (*Minjung*) are the subjects of its theology rather than *Theos* (God).

⁸⁸ Lee, *The Reality and Prospect of the Korea Church*, 180.

grew only 9 percent from 194,794 to 212,044 for the same period.⁸⁹ Thus, the liberal churches have been the minority in the South Korean Protestant churches; on the other hand, the majority of South Korean Protestant churches have grown through *kiboksinang* and church growth movement in this period.

6. The Decline of South Korean Protestant Churches, 1990s-2000s

Since the mid 1990s most Protestant denominations in South Korea have experienced a decline in membership.⁹⁰ Statistics from Gallup Korea in 2005 shows that the growth rate of the Protestant churches was 23.9 percent in 1991, 9.0 percent in 1995, and minus 1.4 percent in 2005. In detail, the Protestant population in South Korea decreased from 8,760,300 in 1995 to 8,616,000 in 2005. On the other hand, Buddhism and Catholicism are growing; the Buddhism population increased 0.4 % and the Catholicism population increased 4.3%.⁹¹

Many factors have caused the decline of the Protestant population in South Korea. For instance, new contexts that include religious pluralism, social mobility and the economic prosperity of Christians, political and social stability, and an increased range of leisure activities may all have affected the declination of the Korean Protestant churches.⁹² Moreover, the Protestant churches are currently being replaced by new functional alternatives, such as sports, movies, leisure time activities, TV, and computer

⁸⁹ Chi-Jun Noh, *A Study of Church-Individualism* (Seoul: Hanul, 1998), 96-97.

⁹⁰ Hong, "Revisiting Church Growth in Korean Protestantism," 190.

⁹¹ Gallup Korea, "Koreans' Religions," Gallup Korea, <http://www.gallup.co.kr> (accessed December 12, 2010).

⁹² Jang, "The Rapid Growth of Christianity in Korea and the Emergence of Cultural Hybridity within it," 51.

games.⁹³ However, at the same time, other religions such as Buddhism and Catholicism are growing, and the total populations of those who have a religion in Korea are increasing from 46.9% to 53.3%.⁹⁴ Thus, these contextual factors are not the crucial reasons for the decline of the Protestant churches in South Korea.

Apart from these contextual factors, the crucial reason for this decline is the diminishing of Protestantism's social credibility.⁹⁵ According to a report on Evangelism and Christian Ethics Institute in *Hankyure Daily News* on November 18, 2008, among the big three Korean religions—Buddhism, Catholicism, and Protestantism—Protestantism ranks lowest in trustworthy religions (See Table 3).⁹⁶ This distrust of the Protestant churches also affects the public image of religion. This report also shows that Protestantism ranks lowest in public image (See Table 3). Moreover, according to a Gallup Korea survey in 2005, a significant number of people are leaving the Protestant churches.⁹⁷ 45.5 percent of those who deserted a religion were Protestant. This survey also gives the reason why people deserted the Protestant church. The highest percentage (32 percent) made their decision based upon a distrust of the South Korean Protestant churches. Respondents stated that this distrust stemmed from the bad conduct of churches and the neglected role of social responsibility within the church.⁹⁸ In the next chapter, the factors that shape the diminishing of Protestantism's social credibility will be discussed in detail.

⁹³ Ibid.

⁹⁴ Gallup Korea, "Koreans' Religions," Gallup Korea, <http://www.gallup.co.kr> (accessed December 12, 2010).

⁹⁵ Hong, "Revisiting Church Growth in Korean Protestantism," 191.

⁹⁶ Evangelism and Christian Ethics Institute, "Trustworthy and Attractive Public Image in Korean Religions," *Hankyure Daily Newspaper*, November 18, 2008.

⁹⁷ Gallup Korea, "Koreans' Religions," 2005.

⁹⁸ Ibid.

Table 3. South Korean Protestantism, the Least Attractive and Trustworthy Religion

Trustful Religions		Attractive public Image
35.2%	Catholic Church	29.8%
31.1%	Buddhism	31.5%
18.0%	Protestant Church	20.6%
15.7%	None	15.0%

C. Conclusion

After Protestantism was introduced in Korea at the end of the nineteenth century, Protestantism experienced remarkable growth for a century. When the first Protestant missionary came to Korea, Korea also had anti-Western and anti-Christian attitudes like other non-Western countries. Thus, the early Protestant mission began with modern hospitals and schools rather than directly preaching Protestantism. Protestantism in Korea was slowly growing until the mid-1890s. After mid-1890s Protestantism in Korea rapidly grew because of the favorable image of Western Protestant missionaries and the Korea's national crisis among superpower countries.

In 1910, Korea signed a treaty of annexation with the Japanese. In this tragic period, many Koreans took Protestantism to gain strength from the Protestant faith. Thus, the Korean Protestant churches continued to grow. After the atomic bombings in Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the Japanese empire withdrew from Korea; however, the U.S and the USSR came to Korea in order to enforce the surrender of the Japanese forces. In this period, Korean Protestant churches experienced division between the north and south.

After the division, Protestant churches in the south experienced explosive growth, whereas churches in the north existed only by name.

Under these circumstances, the Korean War broke out in 1950. Because of the War, many people in the north came to the south to have religious freedom. Thus, the South Korean Protestantism continued to experience growth. In addition, because the Protestant churches provided a lot of material relief, many South Korean were attracted to Protestantism. Thus, conversion to Protestantism continued unabated.

After the War South Korea's economic growth had been remarkable since the 1960s. In this period, South Korean Protestant churches also experienced explosive quantitative growth. *Kiboksinang* (or the prosperity gospel) and Fuller Church Growth Movement caused led to the quantitative growth in the South Korean Protestant churches from 1960s to 1990s. This growing mainline Protestant churches were mostly apolitical. Even though there were liberal Protestant churches based on *Minjung* theology in South Korea, these churches did not grow as much as mainline churches.

However, since the mid 1990s most South Korean Protestant churches have experienced the decline in membership. A government statistics showed that the Protestant population in South Korea decreased from 8,760,300 in 1995 to 8,616,000 in 2005. There are many contextual factors of declination of the membership in Korean Protestantism; however, the crucial reason for this declination is the distrust of the South Korean Protestant churches. I believe that the time has come for the South Korean Protestant churches to reflect and reconsider what problems make South Koreans distrust the Protestant churches and what the roots of the problems are.

CHAPTER 2

Investigating the Problems in South Korean Protestant Churches

A. Introduction

After a century of remarkable growth, South Korean Protestant churches have been experiencing declining membership since the mid 1990s. Even though some church leaders take the current decline seriously, most church leaders in large or mega churches do not because their churches still have a lot of members. I believe that the South Korean Protestant Church stands between “the moon after a night almost as luminous as the day” and “the sun newly risen on the horizon, ruling the day”⁹⁹ as Buhmann describes. To be the sun, which means the Third Church, the South Korean Protestant churches should realize what the problems and their roots are.

In the previous chapter, I asserted that the crucial reason for this declination is the diminishing of Protestantism’s social credibility in South Korea. If so, why did the South Korean Protestant churches lose their social credibility? I believe that church growth syndrome, church individualism, and conservative theology are the main factors that caused the diminishing of social credibility. Thus, in this chapter I will discuss these three factors, and then will investigate problems caused by these factors and explore the roots of these factors in the South Korean Protestant churches. In order to do so, I will analyze the historical, social, and theological factors that are interwoven with Korean Christian history, Korean tradition, and culture.

⁹⁹ Walbert Buhmann, *The Coming of Third Church*, 24.

B. Three Factors of South Korean Protestant Churches

1. Church Growth Syndrome

The first factor that has caused the diminishing of Protestantism's social credibility is something I call "Church Growth Syndrome." The primary goal of ministry in most South Korean Protestant churches can be summed up in one word: "growth."¹⁰⁰ Byung-Suh Kim, a scholar of sociology of religion in South Korea, states, "The size of an institution is understood as a measure of success. Many churches concentrate on the expansion of the congregation, the budget, and the church building."¹⁰¹ Kim points out this church growth syndrome as the "Bigness-syndrome."¹⁰² In most South Korean Protestant churches, the idea that "bigger is better" prevails.

This church growth syndrome makes churches seek a sense of largeness, so the following questions become paramount: How many members come to church? How much is the church budget? How large is the church building? How many Sunday morning services? How many ministers serve the church?¹⁰³ These questions show how numbers are important means to measure the success of the church. Thus, there are many programs and meetings such as the "Evangelism Explosion"¹⁰⁴ program and "40 Days Dawn Prayer Meeting"¹⁰⁵ to gather people in most South Korean Protestant churches. In

¹⁰⁰ Eun Sik Cho, "Korean Church Growth in 1970s: Its Factors and Problems," *Asia Journal of Theology*, 10 no. 2 (1996): 356.

¹⁰¹ Byoung-Suh Kim, "The Explosive Growth of the Korean Church today: A Sociological Analysis," *International Review of Mission* 64 (January 1985): 71.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, 72

¹⁰³ Cho, "Korean Church Growth in 1970s: Its Factors and Problems," 356.

¹⁰⁴ Evangelism Explosion (EE) program is the personal evangelism training that started in Coral Ridge, Florida in 1962 by Dr. D. James Kennedy. EE is an effective program to prepare congregation members to share the gospel and lead non-Christians to Christ. However, EE is based on individualism in the western evangelical theology. This program is famous in the Korean Protestant churches.

¹⁰⁵ 40 Days Dawn Prayer Meeting is a prayer meeting in the Korean Protestant churches. This prayer meeting begins at 5:00 or 5:30 a.m. seven days a week for 40 days. It begins with corporate worship, and then the pastor delivers a meditation. With God as the focal point of the

fact, most South Korean Protestants regard numbers as the essential expression of reality.¹⁰⁶ In addition, most South Korean Protestants believe that churches rapidly growing in membership are filled with the Holy Spirit. Thus, pastors who have large congregations are also considered to have spiritual power and be filled with the Holy Spirit.¹⁰⁷

1) The Problems Caused by Church Growth Syndrome

Church growth syndrome causes many problems. First of all, church growth syndrome bears growth-centered values combined with the value of material superiority and materialism.¹⁰⁸ For instance, church ministry is considered to be successful when church growth increases as measured by the high membership of the congregation, the high budget of the church, and the large size of the church building and other facilities. Individual congregants evaluate a church according to the social status of its members and the amount of offering money given. Church growth that is evaluated by quantitative standards causes changes of church identity.¹⁰⁹

Second, church growth syndrome causes the emergence of mega churches, which undermine small churches. As I discussed in the first chapter, South Korean Protestantism began to decline in the mid 1990s and many churches close down every year, despite the fact that large or mega churches continue to be born. For instance, of the 20 biggest

service, prayer time ensues with simultaneous prayer in which people pray as loud and fervently as they know how. Many Korean Christians are eager to attend this prayer meeting to bless them and their churches.

¹⁰⁶ Bong-Ho Son, *Some Dangers of Rapid Growth in Korean Church Growth Explosion* (Seoul: Word of Life Press, 1983), 35.

¹⁰⁷ Cho, "Korean Church Growth in 1970s: Its Factors and Problems," 356.

¹⁰⁸ Hyun Woo Jang, "More than Numbers: Church Growth in South Korea Churches" (ThM thesis, Stellenbosch University, 2009), 58.

¹⁰⁹ Jungmin Lee, "Mega Churches in Korea," *Dong-a newspaper*, June 2, 2004.

churches in the world, 10 of the biggest churches are located in South Korea.¹¹⁰ With regard to this phenomenon, Young-Gi Hong, who is the president of the Institute for Church Growth in South Korea, states, “The dynamism of the [South] Korean [Protestant] churches today has become a significant element in [South] Korean society. The [South] Korean [Protestant] churches can be characterized by rapid church growth and the emergence of mega churches, and these attract the locus of scholarly investigation.”¹¹¹ It is a reality that the mega churches, which have sophisticated human resources and deep financial support, are getting bigger. On the contrary, small churches, which lack support, are getting smaller. According to one study, 70% of churches in South Korea cannot support themselves.¹¹² In other words, these churches are not financially independent. On the other hand, many large or mega churches have amassed large savings.

Third, church growth syndrome causes unavoidable and severe competition among churches.¹¹³ The South Korean Protestant churches have faced the reality that, without making a serious effort to secure church members, they would lose the competition and would even be in a situation that could prove a threat to the survival of the church. Most churches are affected by the size of the congregation because the more registered church members there are, the more power or influence the church has.¹¹⁴ Hence, it is understandable that most pastors try to increase their church membership in every way. This sometimes leads to stealing other church members, so called “sheep

¹¹⁰ Jaehoon Kim, “20 Biggest Church in the World.”

¹¹¹ Young-Gi Hong, “Encounter with Modernity: The McDonaldization and Charimatization of Korean Mega-churches,” *International Review of Mission* 92 (2003): 239.

¹¹² Newpower, “Mijalim Church in Korea,” Newpower, http://www.newpower.co.kr/sub_read.html?m=11317§ion=sc4 (accessed June 1, 2005).

¹¹³ Jang, “More than Numbers: Church Growth in South Korea Churches,” 59.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 60.

snatching” or “sheep stealing.”¹¹⁵ For instance, most large or mega churches mobilize many church buses to pick up its church members not only in Seoul, the capital city, but also in other cities, even right in front of other churches of both the same and different denominations. Thus, there are large tensions between large or mega churches and small churches in general. These tensions are due, in part, to the tremendous success of numbers-oriented churches. Many pastors from small churches complain of large or mega churches’ disrespectful policies and condescending attitudes toward other churches.¹¹⁶

However, most South Korean Protestants, who moved from small churches to mega churches, are satisfied with their decision.¹¹⁷ In comparison with smaller churches, mega churches provide their members with highly sophisticated client management, educational services and generous resources for diverse training.¹¹⁸ Being a member of a mega church is perhaps like holding membership of a prestigious club. A prestigious membership not only incurs a membership charge, but also enables demands for appropriate services from the club.¹¹⁹ Under these circumstances, most South Korean Protestants come to think that pastors in the large or mega churches have better education and spiritual authority than those in the small churches. Thus, the result is that pastors serving large or mega churches become proud and self-conceited; on the other hand, pastors serving small churches feel a sense of inferiority and frustration.¹²⁰

¹¹⁵ Cho, “Korean Church Growth in 1970s: Its Factors and Problems,” 355.

¹¹⁶ Hwe-Kwon Kim, “The Battles of Korean Protestant churches,” Sisa Press, <http://www.sisapress.com/news/articleView.html?idxno=48144#> (accessed January 7, 2009).

¹¹⁷ Jungmin Lee, “Mega Churches in Korea,” *Dong-a newspaper*, June 2, 2004.

¹¹⁸ Gil-Soo Han, Joy J. Han, and Andrew Eungi Kim, “Serving Two Masters: Protestant Churches in Korea and Money,” *International Journal for the Study of the Christian Church* (December 2009): 346-347.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 347

¹²⁰ Sun-Il Kim, “The Trap of the Mega Churches,” *Gukmin newspaper*, November 5, 2010.

Therefore, church growth syndrome has done more harm than good to the South Korean Protestant churches in general. The church growth syndrome has changed the church into a business enterprise, the minister into a business executive, and the church member into a consumer.¹²¹ The fact that Robert H. Schuller of the Crystal Cathedral and Rick Warren of Saddleback Community Church are becoming heroes to many South Korean pastors suggests the degree of preoccupation of South Korean Protestantism with numbers.¹²² Numbers take precedence over the purity of church discipline and teachings. Numbers are even used to represent the quality of faith. It decreases the credibility of the church as well as its respectability in society.

2) The Root of the Church Growth Syndrome

How can the church growth syndrome be rooted in the South Korean Protestant churches? The church growth syndrome in South Korea was influenced by Fuller Church Growth Theory. Most of the South Korean Protestant churches have enthusiastically learned and practiced Fuller Church Growth Theory without any critical reflection since the 1970s as discussed in the previous chapter. Many of McGavran and Wagner's books were translated into Korean and published in South Korea, and their theories have been propounded by most theological schools for evangelicals, for instance, Asian Center for Theological Studies, a seminary in Seoul, and the Institute of Church Growth in South Korea.¹²³ In this part, I will discuss what Fuller Church Growth Theory is and what the inherent weaknesses of it are.

¹²¹ Cho, "Korean Church Growth in 1970s: Its Factors and Problems," 356.

¹²² Ibid.

¹²³ Chun Lee and D. Nelson, *The Theories of Church Growth* (Seoul: Emmaus Press, 1986), 242.

Fuller Church Growth Theory

Fuller Church Growth Theory regards the church as central to the purpose of God in the world.¹²⁴ The theory gives priority particularly to evangelism over social responsibility. For the church growth theory evangelism aims at numerical growth. The theory is thus concerned with the Pentecostal churches and mega churches, which continue to grow markedly in membership.

Fuller Theological Seminary has developed a theory of mission and church growth under the guidance of Professor Donald McGavran, a central figure of the School of World Mission, and his colleagues since 1960s.¹²⁵ McGavran has published books on church growth, based on thirty years of missionary experience: *The Bridges of God* (1955) and *How Churches Grow* (1959). After that, he modified his missiology, which had been based on the “People Movements,” the theory of “Receptivity,” the differentiation of “Discipling” and “Perfecting,” and the “Homogeneous Unit Principle”¹²⁶ into the church growth theory. His new theory was well presented in his book, *Understanding Church Growth* (1986).¹²⁷ Since 1972, together with Professor C. Peter Wagner, he has started to apply the church growth theory to the American Church.¹²⁸ McGavran’s church growth theory has received much criticism as well as appreciation from the liberals, the evangelicals, and the reformed alike.¹²⁹

Charles R. Taber says that Fuller Church Growth model is founded uncompromisingly on the evangelical approach in mission; the church is seen as central

¹²⁴ D. A. McGavran, *Understanding of Church Growth* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986), 57-58.

¹²⁵ Gwak, “Ecclesiology and Membership Trends in the South Korean Churches,” 61.

¹²⁶ D. A. McGavran, *The Bridge of God* (Eugene: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 1959), 143-189.

¹²⁷ Gwak, “Ecclesiology and Membership Trends in the South Korean Churches,” 61.

¹²⁸ Chun Lee and D. Nelson, *The Theories of Church Growth*, 228.

¹²⁹ Gwak, “Ecclesiology and Membership Trends in the South Korean Churches,” 61.

to the purpose of God in the world.¹³⁰ It is therefore not enough to convert individuals—these converts must become his disciples and dependable members of his church. The multiplication of congregations and the numerical increase of each one become the central goal of mission and the single criterion of success, and even of faithfulness.¹³¹

Fuller Church Growth Theory prefers the numerical dimension to other dimensions of church growth. Peter Wagner, who leads Fuller Church Growth Theory at present, also advocates this preference.¹³² Wagner accepts the integral mission concept, which was set out by the Lausanne Congress (1974): the affirmation of evangelism and socio-political involvement as part of Christian duty and the church's mission. He strongly recommends, however, that the priority should be given to evangelism for planning strategies of church growth.¹³³ Wagner demonstrates this recommendation through the examples of growth in membership in the American Protestant churches as follows:

While there have been numerous cases of Christian social ministries and evangelism enjoying a symbiotic relationship, each helping the other, there are also some cases where it has not worked out well and where social activity has actually hindered church growths. I will grant that there may be unusual circumstances in which, due to disastrous social conditions, the best Christian decision might be to reverse the priorities temporarily. The rule is that we attempt to avoid involvement in social activities, which predictably can reduce our evangelic effectiveness. We cannot afford to sell our birth right for a pot of stew.¹³⁴

Following McGavran and Wagner, most advocates of the Church Growth Theory are impatient to develop programs and techniques that can promote effective evangelism

¹³⁰ Charles R. Taber, *Exploring Church Growth* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983), 118.

¹³¹ Ibid.

¹³² Gwak, "Ecclesiology and Membership Trends in the South Korean Churches," 61-62.

¹³³ Peter Wagner, *Strategies for Church Growth* (Ventura: Regal Books, 1987), 101-111.

¹³⁴ Ibid., 108.

and church growth.¹³⁵ These advocates emphasize that all activities planned for church growth should be focused upon effective evangelism. The crisis in consciousness, provoked by Kelley, regarding the membership decline in the mainline Protestant denominations and the Church Growth Theory of the Fuller Seminary has led to an avalanche of church growth studies, specialists, and organizations since 1972.¹³⁶

Inherent Weaknesses of Fuller Church Growth Theory

Fuller Church Growth Theory has inherent weaknesses. Thus, the South Korean Protestant churches made a mistake to simply copy this theory uncritically and introduce them even though the South Korean Protestant churches were in a different situation from the American churches. As a result, the essence and mission of the church were overlooked and quantitative growth became the standard of successful church growth and pastoral ministry. Therefore, regardless of congregation size, the only target was to grow the church numerically. The weakness and limitation of Fuller Church Growth Theory that the South Korean Protestant churches missed are hermeneutic mistakes, lack of the New Testament support, excessive pursuit of pragmatism, and wrongly defined missiology.

First, they have made hermeneutic mistakes in interpreting biblical context on account of the weakness of the foundational biblical theology, which tends to be partial in interpreting the Bible due to overly focusing on church growth.¹³⁷ According to Charles Taber's assessment, Fuller Church Growth Theory stands deductively on two weak foundations. It is a narrowed-down version of the evangelical hermeneutic and theology.

¹³⁵ Gwak, "Ecclesiology and Membership Trends in the South Korean Churches," 62.

¹³⁶ D. M. Kelley, *Why Conservative Churches are Growing* (Macon: Mercer University, 1986), 54.

¹³⁷ Jang, "More than Numbers: Church Growth in South Korea Churches," 34.

In other words, it is prejudiced in interpreting God's word by focusing only on numerical church growth.¹³⁸ Hence Taber tends to draw the inference of one goal, i.e., numerical church growth, from every biblical context, for which all else may be sacrificed.¹³⁹

Second, Lesslie Newbigin points out that the New Testament does not support McGavran's insistence upon numerical growth as the criterion of success in mission.¹⁴⁰ Paul, he pointed out, never agonizes about results. Instead, in one of his most profoundly missiological passages, he speaks of salvation in eschatological terms and suggests that no one is perfect until the end. God "has consigned all people to disobedience in order that he may have mercy on all" (Romans 11:32-36). It is then, says Newbigin, that "the fathomless depths of God's wisdom and grace will be revealed."¹⁴¹ Meanwhile, "creation groans in travail" (Romans 8:22). Thus, Christians should be neither anxious about their failure or boast about their success, but should faithfully witness "to the one in whom the whole purpose of God for cosmic history has been revealed."¹⁴² Newbigin preferred to speak of the "logic of mission," predicated on the truthfulness of the message as one that cannot but be proclaimed. We do not control the result. This is the Holy Spirit's task. Some people may join the church, others may respond in ways that are invisible to us.¹⁴³

Third, the theory's theology excessively pursues pragmatism.¹⁴⁴ People face the widespread notion that Christians should not be pragmatic. However, the practice of the Church Growth Theory is over-concerned with the pragmatic implementation of Christ's

¹³⁸ Ibid., 34.

¹³⁹ Charles R. Taber, *Exploring Church Growth*, 119.

¹⁴⁰ Lesslie Newbigin, *The Open Secret: An Introduction to Theology of Mission* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 124-126.

¹⁴¹ Ibid., 125.

¹⁴² Ibid.

¹⁴³ Ibid., 124.

¹⁴⁴ Jang, "More than Numbers: Church Growth in South Korea Churches," 35.

great commission.¹⁴⁵ And the pragmatic aspect of theology has resulted in effectiveness-centered ecclesiology.¹⁴⁶ This effectiveness-centered church has shortcomings. Many scholars question whether this ecclesiology can lead the church in the right direction. They presume that the ecclesiology can provide quick solutions, but tend to fail in proposing sustained church growth. Instead, a sound ecclesiology is recommended—one that keeps the balance between its faithfulness and its effectiveness and considers ecclesial change at a deeper level concerning the identity, vision, and direction of the church.¹⁴⁷

2. Church Individualism

The second factor, which causes the diminishing of Protestantism's social credibility, is church individualism. Church individualism means an individual church-centered thought and attitude: it pays attention to only "my church," and disregards other churches or denominations as a whole.¹⁴⁸ In other words, it means "an approach or policy whereby an individual congregation sets its own goals and undertakes its own missions; and invests human and material resources in order to maintain and expand the individual congregation as an organization."¹⁴⁹ Traditionally hierarchical Protestant churches in South Korea are congregational in polity. Each individual local church in a denomination is independent and self-supporting, governed by its own members.

Individual churches choose their own minister and regulate their own internal discipline,

¹⁴⁵ Ibid.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid.

¹⁴⁷ P. Dietterich, *Classes of Changes in Church Organizations* (Chicago: The Center for Parish Development, 1993), 43; C. K. Hadaway and D. A. Roozen, *Church and Denominational Growth* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1993), 65; D. Webster, *Selling Jesus* (Illinois: Intervarsity Press, 1992), 67-70.

¹⁴⁸ Eun Sik Cho, "Korean Church Growth in 1970s: Its Factors and Problems," 354.

¹⁴⁹ Noh, *A Study of Church-Individualism*, 81.

and any denominational council can only offer advice. Thus, church individualism allows for individual church growth only, and it even seems to build a kingdom out of the individual church. This is an over-emphasis on congregationalism. It is based on poor ecclesiology.¹⁵⁰ The problems caused by the church individualism include using money for individual church's own growth, church inheritance, and an over-supply of pastors.

1) The Problems Caused by the Church Individualism

Using Money for Individual Church's Own Growth

The first problem caused by church individualism is using money for the individual church's own growth. One survey shows how most of the South Korean Protestant churches use their money. The survey has found that 46.2% of Protestants in South Korea want their offerings to be primarily used within their own individual churches; on the other hand, only 18.2% of Protestants want their money to be used outside their own churches (for example, orphanages and homeless).¹⁵¹ Moreover, another survey shows the typical Protestant church's financial expenditures. According to the survey, 201 churches (81.7%) in 246 sampled churches expended less than 5% of their gross receipts on social service expense including almsgiving expenses. On the other hand, only 4 churches (1.6%) expended more than 10% of their gross receipts on social service expense.¹⁵²

Moreover, this church individualism makes the churches spend money for construction of new church buildings. Through the rapid growth of South Korean

¹⁵⁰ Cho, "Korean Church Growth in 1970s: Its Factors and Problems," 354.

¹⁵¹ Jung-Ki Kim et al., *A study of Korean church growth and faith* (Seoul: Hyeondae Sahoe Yeonguso, 1982), 176.

¹⁵² Noh, *Sociology in Korean Protestantism*, 191.

Protestant churches, many churches need bigger sanctuaries and parking lots, which can accommodate more congregation members. However, the problem is that most churches spend a lot of money for new buildings. South Korean Protestant pastors believe that when your church has a big new building, your church is growing. Thus, many pastors think that building a big new church is one of the most important ministries for them.

Last year a hot issue in South Korea was the news about Sarang Community Church,¹⁵³ one of the mega churches in South Korea. Sarang Community Church announced that they would move into a new place in Seoul and build a new building because the current facilities are too small to seat their congregation members, over 45,000. This was a hot issue because of the amount of money to move into a new place and build a new building. Sarang Community Church announced they would need 230 million dollars for moving and rebuilding the church. But the serious problem in South Korea is that it is not the only case of Sarang Community Church. Church individualism makes the South Korean Protestant churches to focus on the challenge of building large buildings and filling them with people, with worship that seeks to be entertaining but displays little sense of concern for the community. As a result, most churches from small to large in South Korea use or plan a lot of money to get new buildings.

Church Inheritance

The second problem, caused by church individualism, is church inheritance. Church inheritance usually means the succession of the church to the son of the senior

¹⁵³ Sarang Community Church is one of the mega churches in South Korea. It was built in 1978 in Seoul, South Korea. Now this church has 45,000 congregation members.

minister of a church.¹⁵⁴ Recent examples of church inheritance come from Methodist mega churches in Seoul, South Korea: the Gwanglim Methodist Church, the Gumran Methodist Church, and the Immanuel Methodist Church.¹⁵⁵ Three brothers from the same family have headed all three churches.¹⁵⁶ All of them bequeathed their senior pastor positions to their own sons. In addition, a son of the senior pastor of Kyung Hyang Presbyterian Church inherited the leadership position in 2004. The previous senior of the church started ministry with 6 members in 1973, and the church has grown to be 15,000 members today.¹⁵⁷

Furthermore, an expedient way for church inheritance to avoid media criticism is building a new church for a family member near the original church. For instance, Somang Presbyterian Church¹⁵⁸ is one of the mega churches in Seoul. When the senior pastor and founder of Somang Presbyterian Church, Rev. S. Kwak, retired in 2003, the church appointed a new pastor, Rev. J. Kim. However, before Rev. S. Kwak retired, he gave his son, Rev. Y. Kwak, 8 million dollars of his church money to build a new church called “Jesus Somang Presbyterian Church”¹⁵⁹ in Bundang, a satellite town near Seoul. Even though Rev. S. Kwak did not hand down the church to his son directly, it was

¹⁵⁴ In South Korean Protestant churches, leaderships are male-oriented. In particular, there is no record of women’s church inheritance yet.

¹⁵⁵ Han et al., “Serving Two Masters: Protestant Churches in Korea and Money,” 348. The Gwanglim Methodist Church has approximately 30,000 congregation members; the Gumran Methodist Church has approximately 50,000; and the Immanuel Methodist Church has approximately 10,000.

¹⁵⁶ Ibid.

¹⁵⁷ Ibid., 349.

¹⁵⁸ Somang Presbyterian Church is also one of the mega churches in Korea. It was built in 1977 in Seoul. Now this church has 30,000 congregation members.

¹⁵⁹ Jesus Somang Presbyterian Church was built in Bundang in 2003 by Rev. Y. Kwak (Son) when S. Kwak (Father) retired from Somang Presbyterian Church in Seoul.

another means of church inheritance. In addition, one survey shows that 60% of the senior pastors in the South Korean Protestant churches support church inheritance.¹⁶⁰

These processes are similar to the way that the ownership of business conglomerates is handed down from their founders to their sons and daughters in South Korea.¹⁶¹ According to one article, this newly emerging church inheritance is derived from the notion that it is the founding minister of a church, rather than God, who owns the church.¹⁶² This article also reports how some people view this practice: “The church is already an object of harsh criticism for its business-like practice, materialization, and secularization. Now this practice of bequeathing a church to a son of the senior minister is a sign of giving up the intrinsic nature of the church.”¹⁶³

The practice of church inheritance was not criticized by the mass media until the 1990s because church inheritance was not common. However, since the 2000s, there have been a lot of church inheritance practices among large or mega churches because many senior pastors of large or mega churches have met the time for retirement. It is now seen as intrinsic to the misguided religio-economic entrepreneurship in South Korean Protestant Christianity.¹⁶⁴

The most important reason for the continuation of this practice is the involvement of economic interests. If there were no economic interests, senior pastors would not have passed the leadership to their sons. However, because there are economic interests, merit-based appointment of anybody other than the senior minister’s son is a

¹⁶⁰ Hankook Newspaper, “Church Inheritance,” *Hankook Newspaper*, July 22, 2002.

¹⁶¹ Han et al., “Serving Two Masters: Protestant Churches in Korea and Money,” 349.

¹⁶² Chong-Rak Kim, “Critiques from inside and outside against the inheritance of mega churches,” *Munhwa newspaper*, April 1, 2000.

¹⁶³ Ibid.

¹⁶⁴ Han et al., “Serving Two Masters: Protestant Churches in Korea and Money,” 349.

loss to a senior pastor's family.¹⁶⁵ For instance, a senior pastor's retiring life can be economically guaranteed if the senior pastor hands the leadership over to his son.

The inheritance of a church by the pastor's son has usually happened in large or mega churches, where those, who take over leadership, can obtain great economic gains. In the culture of church individualism, a foundation pastor of a large or mega church tends to attribute its exponential growth to his own effort and struggle. Most foundation pastors regard the church as their own personal asset like other enterprises.¹⁶⁶ Thus, church inheritance is decided by foundation senior pastor's decision. In this vein, it is more than "appropriate" for senior pastors to hand down the church to their children who are the only deserving persons to maintain their achievement and prevent their reputation from being tarnished.¹⁶⁷

According to Gwang-Sik Kim, a systematic theologian in South Korea, church leadership positions should not be limited to a group of privileged people on the basis of close networks if the church is to carry out its original duties conscientiously, and that all the South Korean churches should make it a matter of regulation that retiring ministers have to leave the church rather than remain and continue to influence the decision-making processes of the congregation.¹⁶⁸

An Over-Supply of Pastors

¹⁶⁵ Gwang-Sik Kim, "On the inheritance of the church" *Christian Thought* 44, no. 12 (2000): 210-218

¹⁶⁶ Han et al., "Serving Two Masters: Protestant Churches in Korea and Money," 350.

¹⁶⁷ Jin-Ku Yi, "Protestantism and ideology of growth," *Dangdae Bipyong* [Critique of contemporary times] Autumn (2000): 225.

¹⁶⁸ Kim, "On the inheritance of the church," 215-218.

The third problem caused by church individualism is an over-supply of pastors. There are over 200 Protestant denominations in South Korea, and most denominations have their own seminaries to produce future ministers.¹⁶⁹ However, in the context of church individualism, the majority of seminaries receive little financial support from their own denominations. Thus, the seminaries are poorly resourced and rely financially on their students' tuition fees.¹⁷⁰ The student quota in each college is determined by a budgetary requirement that it meet its operating expenses; hence, the number of students is greater than each denomination requires.¹⁷¹ Thus, seminary graduates are overflowing in South Korea.

Moreover, because the number of Protestant seminaries is increasing, seminary graduates or pastors are overflowing. According to a survey, in 1991, there were only 50 theological seminaries recognized by the South Korean government, and these seminaries produced only 1,500 graduates per year. However, in 2006, there are more than 400 theological seminaries in South Korea, and they produce about 7,000 graduates per year.¹⁷² In contrast, South Korean Catholicism maintains only seven theological seminaries, accepting 400-500 applicants per year, but producing only about 300 per year due to dropouts.¹⁷³ Even though the population of Catholicism (5,140,000) is less than Protestantism's (8,610,000) in South Korea, the number of seminary graduates is huge different. Another survey also shows that the number of churchgoers increased by 10%

¹⁶⁹ Chi-Jun Noh, "A study of the change in the number of Christians and a non-growth of Christianity in Korea," *History and Society* 52, Autumn (1997): 148

¹⁷⁰ Han et al., "Serving Two Masters: Protestant Churches in Korea and Money," 350.

¹⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 149.

¹⁷² Cheol-Su Pak, "High education fever for theological graduate studies: only radical structural adjustment will inject Korean Christianity its future," *NewsNJoy*, December 14, 2006. In 1992, the Korean ministry of Education could not even find out the exact number of Theological Training Centers, but assumed that there were about 270 unregistered centers.

¹⁷³ *Ibid.*

between 1990 and 1995, but the number of churches increased by 62.6% (from 35,706 to 58,046) and the number of clergy by 68.9% (from 58,542 to 98,905).¹⁷⁴ Thus, many seminary graduates and pastors do not find a job from churches. And some of them become involved in criminal activities because of economic reasons. These pastor's criminal activities influence the negative public image of South Korean Protestant churches.¹⁷⁵

Furthermore, unregistered theological seminaries produce a lot of seminary graduates who have poor quality. Many individual churches have their own theological seminary or Bible schools (because of church individualism). Most of them are unregistered by the South Korean government. These unregistered theological seminaries have poor facilities such as sub-standard classroom and libraries. Their instructors are generally employed on a seasonal basis, and most of them have taken their higher degrees at unrecognized institutes.¹⁷⁶ Unqualified instructors, sub-standard facilities, the disorganized operation of learning programs, and impromptu teaching curricula are bound to produce unqualified ministers.¹⁷⁷ Thus, according to Yeong-Han Kim, a professor at Sungsil University in South Korea, unregistered seminaries usually argue for education "only according to the Bible," and "God's calling rather than intellectual ability."¹⁷⁸ In addition, he also points out the uniqueness of the quality requires of theological graduates or ministers-to-be, but those who are trained in unregistered

¹⁷⁴ Chi-Jun Noh, "A study of the change in the number of Christians and a non-growth of Christianity in Korea," 149.

¹⁷⁵ Han et al., "Serving Two Masters: Protestant Churches in Korea and Money," 351.

¹⁷⁶ Un-Hyeong Jeong, "We must prevent the production of unqualified clergy," *Gukmin newspaper*, August 28, 2007.

¹⁷⁷ Ibid.

¹⁷⁸ Yeong-Han Kim, "Keynote speech: a study of the factors for the decline of the Korean church and some ways to overcome it." In *An analysis of the growth and decline of the Korean church and some ways to overcome: a volume of the 10th Seminar on Christian cultures and theology*, edited by Sungsil University Institute of Christian Cultures, 24. Seoul: Sungsil University, 1998.

seminaries are not only ill qualified and carry no authority as spiritual leaders.¹⁷⁹

According to one study, roughly 75% of theological graduates in South Korea belong to this category.¹⁸⁰ It is huge amount. These seminary graduates are also occupied with church growth syndrome in these unregistered seminaries. Thus, they wish to achieve a membership of 1,000 to 2,000 in their individual congregations after graduation.¹⁸¹ This is why the fundamental quality of the clergy is often under scrutiny in the media.¹⁸²

2) Roots of Church individualism

Many historical, social, and cultural roots account for church individualism in Korean Protestant churches. The first root is the Nevius Mission Plan. The Nevius Method is known today as the “Three-Self Method,” which also has roots in the “three-self” mission strategies advocated by Henry Venn in England and Rufus Anderson in America.¹⁸³ The first “self” is *self-government*, that is, turn over the church to Korean control as soon as there is a Korean ordained ministry and eldership to lead it. That was done in 1907, the year the first class graduated from the first Korean seminary.¹⁸⁴ The second “self” is *self-support*. That was done even earlier, in the 1890s. The mission decided not to pay the salaries of Korean pastors or build Korean churches with foreign money. Instead, in faith, they entrusted the full responsibilities of Christian stewardship to their converts. Koreans have been “tithes” ever since.¹⁸⁵ The third “self” is *self-*

¹⁷⁹ Ibid., 24-25.

¹⁸⁰ Han et al., “Serving Two Masters: Protestant Churches in Korea and Money,” 350.

¹⁸¹ Ibid., 352.

¹⁸² Ibid.

¹⁸³ Samuel Hugh Moffett, “Has Christianity Failed in Asia?” 209.

¹⁸⁴ Ibid.

¹⁸⁵ Ibid.

propagation, or lay evangelism.¹⁸⁶ In fact, this Nevius Mission Plan was a factor to rapidly grow Korean Protestantism. However, this plan injected an independent nature into Korean Protestant Christianity throughout its history. The central aim of the plan was to lead churches in the mission field to be “independent, self-reliant, and aggressive native churches,” which was the 7th principle adopted.¹⁸⁷

The second root is Confucianism in South Korea. An indigenized Confucianism has heavily influenced Christianity in South Korea: family-oriented idea.¹⁸⁸ This family-oriented idea has led South Korean Protestants to have a strong sense of in-group loyalty.¹⁸⁹ “Family-like” relations and “we feelings” amongst members within a congregation are strongly cultivated and can make each congregation exclusive to outsiders.¹⁹⁰ This tendency has seriously entrenched the already prevalent church individualism whereby there is little cooperation, but rather competition amongst churches, regardless of whether they belong to the same denomination or not.¹⁹¹

The third root is Protestant church policy in South Korea. The church polity in South Korean Protestant churches is totally different from that of South Korean Catholic churches; for instance, Presbyterian and Congregationalist types of polity are most prevalent in the South Korean Protestantism. The presidential term of each denominational council is only a year or slightly longer, thus it is difficult to establish a

¹⁸⁶ Ibid.

¹⁸⁷ Ill-Soo Kim, “Organizational Patterns of Korean-American Methodist Churches: Denominationalism and Personal Community.” In *Rethinking Methodist History*, edited by R. E. Richey and K. E. Rowe, 207. Nashville: Kingswood Books, 1985.

¹⁸⁸ Han, et al., “Serving Two Masters: Protestant Churches in Korea and Money,” 343.

¹⁸⁹ Byoung-Suh Kim, “Religiosity and stratification within Korean Christianity-Protestantism.” In *Christianity in Korea*, edited by Robert E. Buswell, Jr. and Timothy S. Lee, 309-329. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2006.

¹⁹⁰ Ki-Chun Yi, “Direction of the reformation of ministry structure in the Korean church,” *Theology and the World* 8 (1982): 514; Noh, *A study of church-individualism*, 87.

¹⁹¹ Hyeong-Muk Choe, “Church-individualism, a waste of talents,” *Good News in the Divided World* (1998): 4-5.

strongly centralized organization by any means. As a result, the denominational council fails to form a strong network of co-operation among member congregations; and the most important and practical decision-making powers lie with each individual church council consisting of the clergy and elders.¹⁹² More importantly perhaps, the invitation and settlement of a minister are totally controlled by the individual congregation. This makes it difficult for any denominational council to discourage the church individualism that continues to flourish.¹⁹³

3. Conservative Theology

The third factor, which causes the diminishing of Protestantism's social credibility, is conservative theology. Conservative theology is an important element to understand the South Korean Protestant churches. Conservative theology tends to focus on personal salvation rather than social responsibility or social concerns. Thus, conservative theology has influenced the South Korean Protestant churches to escape from socio-political realities.

1) The Problem Caused by Conservative Theology

Disregard of Socio-Political Realities

The problem caused by conservative theology in the South Korean Protestant churches is disregard of socio-political realities. Throughout the history of the Korean Protestant churches, churches have conformed to the power of the government and have been uncritical of injustices. The churches did not speak up against evil, systematic

¹⁹² Jae-Seong Kim, "A study on the church-individualism and growth of Korean Protestant churches" (MA's dissertation, Chonnam National University, 2004), 62.

¹⁹³ Han, et al., "Serving Two Masters: Protestant Churches in Korea and Money," 343.

oppression, and so forth. Instead, the churches focused on the spiritual revival, as if spirits were not within bodies.¹⁹⁴

Moreover, in the South Korean Protestant churches, there was no motivation to advocate for underprivileged people, the powerless, and the oppressed.¹⁹⁵ As Christian Alliance for Church Reform indicates, the South Korean Protestant churches take on the characteristic of “in-group solidarity” and “out-group indifference.”¹⁹⁶ In other words, the members of each church have very high commitment to their own churches in terms of attendance, pledge, etc. However, they hardly relate to the ministry outside their churches. Thus, the South Korean Protestant churches are driven by personal salvation at the expense of the larger community.

Most church leaders in the South Korean Protestant churches are socially and politically inactive, believing that it is best not to involve themselves in any political or social reform movements.¹⁹⁷ Thus, most South Korean Protestant churches turn away from the socio-political reality of the country to devote their energies to the cultivation of individual spiritual growth, to “soul winning,” and church growth. Moreover, most Protestant church leaders in South Korea think that if all individuals believe in Jesus, all socio-political problems will be solved.¹⁹⁸ This attitude makes people disregard political corruption, economic inequality, labor problems, social injustice, and ecological issues. Thus, Protestantism in South Korea became more and more apolitical, individualistic and worldly in its characteristics.

¹⁹⁴ Cho, “Korean Church Growth in 1970s: Its Factors and Problems,” 353.

¹⁹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁹⁶ Christian Alliance for Church Reform, “Healthy Church” (Lecture, Christian Alliance for Church Reform, Seoul, May 3, 2005).

¹⁹⁷ Joseph Jung, “Renewing the Church for Mission,” *An International Review*, vol. 37, no. 2, (April, 2009): 252.

¹⁹⁸ Cho, “Korean Church Growth in 1970s: Its Factors and Problems,” 353.

2) The Roots of Conservative Theology

Shamanism in South Korea

The first root of conservative theology in the South Korean Protestant churches is shamanism. Shamanism is the most important element that has shaped South Koreans in ways that bodily lives are dependent on the spiritual realm. People believed that the world is full of the spirits. In the shamanistic cosmology, these spirits can bless or curse human beings. So, people were much concerned about their future or their present lives. In this kind of shamanistic community there has been tendency to be selfish because people were only concerned about “my” or “our” family. The concept of the community was narrowly defined. When conservative Protestantism was introduced into Korea, conservative theology’s spiritual-oriented and personal-oriented elements matched well with the shamanistic emphases on the spirits and narrow community.¹⁹⁹

Therefore, conservative theology influenced by shamanism causes a lack of consciousness of social responsibility and non-practice of justice.²⁰⁰ In addition, this theology also fosters a lack of concern about neighbor and society, and promotes strict separation between religious life and social life, and between church and society. Thus, Protestants under this theology are not concerned with how to live in the society as Christians or how to carry out their worldly works.²⁰¹

¹⁹⁹ Yung Suk Kim, “The Roots of a Conservative Theology in Korea” *Biblical Study and Life*, <http://www.youaregood.com/theologykorea.htm> (accessed March 1, 2011).

²⁰⁰ Cho, “Korean Church Growth in 1970s: Its Factors and Problems,” 352.

²⁰¹ *Ibid.*

Western Missionaries

Western missionaries also influenced conservative theology in the South Korean Protestant churches. Korean Protestantism began with the Western missionaries to Korea, the majority of who were American Presbyterian and Methodists. The Western missionaries who brought Protestantism to Korea over a century ago were usually American pietistic and revivalists.²⁰²

American missionaries' personal and educational background and their works in Korea help to explain how the missionaries were conservative. There were three major missionaries in Korea: Horace Newton Allen, Horace Grant Underwood, and Henry Appenzeller.²⁰³ Allen was greatly influenced by his ancestry in New England and had a pioneering spirit.²⁰⁴ His college education at Wesleyan intensified both his Americanism and his mission-oriented piety. On the other hand, Underwood was born in London, England. His father, who lived waiting for Christ's imminent coming, greatly influenced on his son's piety and faith. Later on, they moved to America, and Underwood joined the Dutch Reformed Church. His seminary education took place at Dutch Reformed Theological Seminary at New Brunswick, New Jersey, graduating in 1884. During his seminary time of three years, his heart was ablaze with zeal for the foreign mission. His church also gave him a sense of urgency of the mission. Underwood was also greatly affected by the devotion of the Salvation Army. Finally, Appenzeller studied at Drew Seminary, New Jersey. He was raised with a strong devotion to the Bible and the

²⁰² Jae-Buhm Hwang, "A Study of the Fundamentalist Tendency in Korean Protestantism: With Special Reference to the Korean Presbyterian Church," *Acta Koreana* Vol. 11, no. 3, (December 2008): 127.

²⁰³ Kim, "The Roots of a Conservative Theology in Korea."

²⁰⁴ Everett N. Hunt, *Protestant Pioneers in Korea* (New York: Orbis Books, 1980), 23.

Heidelberg Catechism by his mother. His college education helped him to have a deep emphasis on personal piety at Franklin and Marshall.²⁰⁵

For these American missionaries, the motivation of mission in Korea lied in saving the lost souls by propagating the gospel.²⁰⁶ They did not have any other concern with which they should have done their work differently other than personal conversion. In other words, they did not care about politics or social justice. Moreover, at the end of the nineteenth century, Korea was gradually falling victim to the Japanese colonial power. Many converted Protestants wanted to involve political activities to defend their country. However, the missionaries as the leaders of the church not only discouraged Korean Protestant Christians' political activities, but also even made a public resolution to forbid them, a tragic action that has contributed to the dualism and spiritualism of Korean Protestant Christians.²⁰⁷ The resolution titled "Some Conditions about the Church's Relation to the State" was passed in 1901 by the General Assembly of the Presbyterian missionaries in Korea, and its points read as follows:

1. We pastors [missionaries] shall not meddle in Korean national and governmental affairs.
2. The church is to be separated from the state, and we shall not interfere in the state's affairs...
5. The church belongs to and lives by the Holy Spirit, and is not a governmental office; it therefore to be used for worship, education and ecclesiastical affairs, and not for political purposes. In the church no one is allowed to publicly discuss political affairs. It is even more forbidden for a Christian to speak at the parsonage of the political affairs, which cannot be discussed publicly elsewhere.²⁰⁸

²⁰⁵ Ibid., 24-25.

²⁰⁶ Kim, "The Roots of a Conservative Theology in Korea."

²⁰⁷ Hwang, "A Study of the Fundamentalist Tendency in Korean Protestantism: With Special Reference to the Korean Presbyterian Church," 127-128.

²⁰⁸ Quoted from Gil Sop Song, *History of Theological Thought in Korea* (Seoul: CLS, 1987), 119. This resolution originally comes from: Christ Newspaper, Vol. 5, no. 40, October 3, 1901.

Furthermore, after the Japanese emperor occupied Korea, the American missionaries made a resolution to ask their Korean followers to recognize the Japanese emperor as their king.²⁰⁹ So Arthur J. Brown, the leader of the Korea mission of the Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A., created the term “loyal recognition,” saying,

Loyal recognition is, I believe, the sound position. It is in accord with the example of Christ, who loyally submitted himself and advised his Apostles to submit themselves to a far worse government than the Japanese, and it is in line with the teaching of Paul in Romans 13:1²¹⁰ ...So far from missionaries inciting Koreans against the Japanese, they have really done more to influence them to submit to Japanese Government than any other class of men. Repeated efforts to embroil the churches in revolutionary propaganda have been suppressed by missionaries.²¹¹

Therefore, loyal recognition’s impact on the Korean Protestant Christian mind was profound, stimulating Korean Protestant Christians to escape from the socio-political realm and remain in the spiritual one. Thus, these missionaries’ conservative theology made South Korean Protestants turned away from social realities.

C. Conclusion

Through the previous chapter, I analyzed that the crucial reason for the decline of membership in the South Korean Protestant churches is the diminishing of Protestantism’s social credibility. In this chapter, I introduced three major factors to cause the distrust of the Protestant churches: 1) church growth syndrome, 2) church-individualism, and 3) conservative theology. Church growth syndrome as the conception

²⁰⁹ Hwang, “A Study of the Fundamentalist Tendency in Korean Protestantism: With Special Reference to the Korean Presbyterian Church,” 127.

²¹⁰ “Let every person be subject to the governing authorities; for there is no authority except from God, and those authorities that exist have been instituted by God” (NRSV).

²¹¹ Arthur J. Brown, *Report on the a Second Visit to China, Japan and Korea, 1909* (New York: Board of Foreign Missions of the Presbyterian Church in the U. S. A., 1910), 82.

of “bigger is better,” causes growth-centered value, the emergence of mega-churches, and severe competition among churches. The root of church growth syndrome is Fuller Church Growth Theory. Next, church individualism, an individual church-centered thought and attitude, causes using money for the individual church’s own growth, church inheritance, and an over-supply of pastors. The roots of church individualism are the Nevius Mission Plan by Western missionaries, Confucianism, and Protestant church’s policy in South Korea. Finally, conservative theology focusing on personal salvation rather than social responsibility or social concerns causes disregarding from the socio-political realities. The roots of conservative theology in South Korea are shamanism and Western missionaries’ theology.

Such fundamental problems, caused by three factors, have created the diminishing of Protestantism’s social credibility, which is a major crisis in contemporary South Korean Protestant churches. Since the mid 1990s, most mainline denominations in South Korea have experienced a decline in membership and attendance. The current decline may be a serious warning signal that shows the future of the South Korean Protestant churches.

I believe that the time has come for the South Korean Protestant churches to reflect and reconsider its theology for evangelism, mission, ecclesiology and ministry. Unless South Korean Protestant churches resolve current challenges and find a new pastoral direction for the future, the South Korean Protestant churches will decline much faster than Western churches because the Protestant churches have not yet permeated into the cultural context of South Korea.²¹² Thus, in the next chapter, I will discuss how to

²¹² Jung, “Renewing the Church for Mission,” 239.

transform South Korean Protestant churches and move beyond the problems affecting the South Korean Protestant churches.

CHAPTER 3

Transforming South Korean Protestant Churches

A. Introduction

In the previous chapter, I discussed these three factors in South Korean Protestant churches—church growth syndrome, church individualism, and conservative theology. Then, I investigated problems caused by these factors and explored their roots in the South Korean Protestant churches. As analyzed in the previous chapter, these problems have influenced the Protestantism diminishing social credibility in South Korea.

In this chapter, I will suggest four tasks to transform South Korean Protestant churches and to move beyond the problems. The first one is to have new ecclesial models: a servant and an eschatological community model. The second one is to have the principles of interdependence and partnership among Protestant churches in South Korea. The third one is to integrate proclamation of the gospel with social responsibilities in the South Korean Protestant churches. The last one is to change the church growth pattern in the Protestant churches in South Korea from quantity-oriented to quality-oriented.

B. Four Tasks to Transform South Korean Protestant Churches

1. Having New Ecclesial Models for South Korean Protestant Churches: Servant Model and Eschatological Community Model

The first transforming task for the South Korean Protestant churches is to have new ecclesial models. The Protestant churches in South Korea have been ruled by the institutional model. In this model, the church is the school that instructs them regarding the truths they need to know for the sake of their eternal salvation. Thus, church members

have only to be submissive and docile, and to rely on the ministrations of the church.²¹³ However, the institutional model leads to some unfortunate consequences. While some virtues like obedience are strongly accented, others are not. Clericalism tends to reduce the laity to a condition of passivity, and to make their apostolate a mere appendage of the apostolate of the hierarchy.²¹⁴ Unfortunately, despite differences in structure, context and theology, many South Korean Protestant churches have tried to follow this model. As a result, church identity in South Korea is evaluated by institutional resources such as the number of members, the number of ministers, church budget, and church buildings. Under these circumstances, Protestant church leaders in South Korea have tried to grow their own churches through abundant institutional resources.²¹⁵

The South Korean Protestant churches need new ecclesial models, which are the servant model and the eschatological community model. First of all, the South Korean Protestant church should implement the servant model. Dietrich Bonhoeffer in his *Letters and Papers from Prison* calls for a servant church:

The Church is the Church only when it exists for others. To make a start, it should give away all its property to those in need. The clergy must live solely on the free-will offerings of their congregations, or possibly engage in some secular calling. The Church must share in the secular problems of ordinary human life, not dominating, but helping and serving.²¹⁶

As Bonhoeffer points out, the church is the church only when it exists for others.

However, the South Korean Protestant churches exist only for themselves or their

²¹³ Avery Robert Dulles, *Models of the Church* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday & Co., 1974), 41.

²¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 43.

²¹⁵ Un, "After Church Growth in Korea: Search for an Alternative Ecclesial Model," 168-169.

²¹⁶ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison* (New York: Macmillan, 1967), 203-204.

numerical growth. Consequently, many Protestants in South Korea have been disappointed in their churches, and they have been leaving.

The servant model asserts that the church should consider itself as part of the total human family, sharing the same concerns with everyone.²¹⁷ This model is related to the ministry of Jesus, the suffering servant of God who was certainly “a man for others,” provides the template for this model: “just as Jesus came into the world not to be served but to serve, so the church, carrying on the mission of Jesus, seeks to serve the world by fostering the brotherhood of all men.”²¹⁸ As Jesus was the “man for others,” so much the church should be “the community for others.”²¹⁹ When the South Korean Protestant churches have this model, they can emphasize serving others and not simply serving the church’s self-interest. However, the church as servant model frequently lacks an eschatological perspective. Without an eschatological self-understanding, the church is no different from a social service organization.²²⁰

Therefore, another ecclesial model is needed to complement the weak point of the servant model. It is the eschatological community model. This is based on the theme of the Kingdom of God. According to Jurgen Moltmann, the coming Kingdom of God is already present in the world history.²²¹ The present condition of the world is the anticipating reality of the coming Kingdom.²²² In other words, the present condition of the world will not be totally annulled, but is essential to the coming world. There are good aspects in this world because what God has created is good, and God will not

²¹⁷ Dulles, *Models of the Church*, 91.

²¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 91-92.

²¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 93.

²²⁰ Un, “After Church Growth in Korea: Search for an Alternative Ecclesial Model,” 171.

²²¹ Van Nam Kim, *A Church of Hope: A Study of the Eschatological Ecclesiology of Jurgen Moltmann* (Lanham: University Press of America, 2005), 374-375.

²²² *Ibid.*, 375.

abandon it. Thus, the church as the eschatological community, in anticipating the coming Kingdom, will contribute to improving the present condition of the temporal world. This eschatological community model is urgently needed for the South Korean Protestant churches, which has been dominated by only numerical church growth syndrome, not the understanding of God's Kingdom.

2. Having the Principles of Interdependence and Partnership

The second transforming task for the South Korean Protestant churches is to have the principles of interdependence and partnership among the churches. Interdependence and partnership are also called symbiosis, which is the intimate living together of two dissimilar organisms in a mutually beneficial relationship.²²³ Under the principles of interdependence and partnership, all churches in the world work together. On the other hand, the lack of the principles of interdependence and partnership has resulted in competition and monoculture among churches.

Unfortunately, the South Korean Protestant churches have not exhibited the principles of interdependence and partnership throughout Korean Christian history. Because the Protestant churches lack the principles of interdependence and partnership, the churches in South Korea have competition and monoculture. As discussed in the previous chapter, under church growth syndrome and church individualism, the South Korean Protestant churches have unavoidable and severe competitions among churches for the growth and the survival of church. Competition involves dissimilar organisms, but these organisms harm, rather than help, one another.²²⁴ Moreover, under the

²²³ Hong, "Revising Church Growth in Korean Protestantism," 197.

²²⁴ Ibid.

manifestation of a monoculture, the large or mega churches are powerful in denominational conference because of their resources. As a result, a comparative sense of inferiority has emerged among smaller churches.²²⁵

Therefore, the South Korean Protestant churches should have the principles of interdependence and partnership, not competition; they need each other. To have the principle of interdependence and partnership, South Korean Protestant churches need to develop a non-sectarian conception reflecting a Trinitarian theology.²²⁶ The central tenet of the Trinitarian being of God is that the persons are constituted by one another in the relations that exist with the one ontological dynamic, where they have different roles. Thus, small and large churches have their own roles. Small and large churches should endeavor to establish mutually supportive relationships with each other for their communities. For instance, small churches should support large churches with their deep relationship to the community; large churches should support small churches with their financial and human resources. Small churches should not be considered simply as churches that failed to grow because of their size; and large churches should not become complacent over their resources. To practice this task, leaders of the South Korean Protestant churches should gather to discuss the problems such as competitions among the South Korean churches, to discuss how symbiotic relationships among churches can be realized, and to discuss how they can build the Kingdom of God together.

3. Integration between Proclamation of the Gospel and Social Responsibility in South Korean Protestant Churches

²²⁵ Ibid.

²²⁶ Ibid., 198.

The third transforming task for the South Korean Protestant churches is to integrate the proclamation of the gospel with a higher sense of social responsibility. For most South Korean Protestant churches, the most important ministry of the church is to preach the gospel to sinners calling them to repentance through their decisions for Christ. Thus, all related programs of the Protestant churches in South Korea are oriented toward the individual salvation. Since the individual salvation is the main goal, little attention is given to socio-political concerns. In South Korea, most church leaders, who adhere to this predilection of evangelism against social-political concern, believe that they do not need to intervene in any social problem because if an individual believes in Jesus, all socio-political problems would be solved.

However, the South Korean Protestant churches should share God's concern for justice in the world. Thus, the Protestant churches have a duty not only to proclaim the gospel for individual salvation, but also to bring justice and righteousness in the world. Proclamation and social responsibility are duties tied to the character of God and God's message of salvation. The churches should understand that God's message of salvation implies a message of judgment upon any form of alienation, oppression, and discrimination.²²⁷

Proclamation of the gospel and social responsibility of the South Korean Protestant churches cannot be dichotomized. Evangelism should be a holistic approach in which its main concern is the restoration of humanity to that place of community with God and other human beings. Proclamation and social action are intrinsically connected

²²⁷ Angel Santiago-Vendrell, "Evangelism and Social Responsibility," *Apuntes* 24, no. 2 (Summer 2004): 49-50.

to each other in the assurance of the propagation of the Kingdom of God.²²⁸ The South Korean Protestant churches have to practice an incarnational activity representing God and God's mercy, kindness, and love to the world. Proclamation and social action becomes an incarnational activity of the churches when the churches bring into account the mercy and love of God in solidarity with the less privileged of the world.²²⁹

The South Korean Protestant churches are called to be in solidarity with South Korean society. Solidarity means entering and staying in the world of the less privileged, facing their struggles, and overcoming life together in the spirit of Jesus.²³⁰ Gustavo Gutierrez refers to solidarity as "liberating praxis." Gutierrez states, "it is a praxis of love of neighbor, and love for Christ in the neighbor, for Christ identifies himself with the least of our human brothers and sisters."²³¹ Solidarity is entering the world of the other to face together the challenges of life. This requires an act of self-denial from the church.

When the South Korean Protestant churches are present accompanying those who suffer and struggle in life, they become incarnated in the image of God to those people. Therefore, the South Korean Protestant churches have to be among the oppressed and to endeavor for the just society where there is no oppression, disfranchisement, and alienation. The reign of God is incompatible with any form of social injustice.²³² Therefore, the South Korean Protestant churches should keep in mind that the betterment of society is to work for the reign of God.

²²⁸ Ibid., 52-53.

²²⁹ Ibid., 53.

²³⁰ Ibid.

²³¹ Gustavo Gutierrez, "Truth and Theology" in *Gustavo Gutierrez. Essential Writing*. (Edited by James Nickoloff) Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1996. 57.

²³² Angel Santiago-Vendrell, "Evangelism and Social Responsibility," 54.

4. Changing Church Growth Pattern from Quantity-Oriented to Quality-Oriented

The fourth transforming task for the South Korean Protestant churches is to change the church growth pattern from quantity-oriented to quality-oriented.

Unfortunately, the growth patterns of certain successful churches mainly represent their increasing churchgoing population in South Korea. This overemphasis on quantitative growth characterizes a tendency of the South Korean Protestant churches to evaluate success in economic terms: productivity.²³³ Protestantism in South Korea is reduced to relying on quick, catchy, and attractive packages. In worst cases, means and ends become reversed and administrators do ministry in order to grow. The South Korean Protestant churches seem to treat human beings as target audiences to be manipulated into conversion, not as creatures that bear God's image. As a result, the preoccupation of the South Korean Protestant churches with materialistic lifestyles and success-oriented ideologies threatens the credibility of church.²³⁴

The South Korean Protestant churches must realize that the number of a church should not simply be understood as a measure of success. As indicated in the previous chapter, Newbigin asserts that the New Testament does not concern results or anxiety about numbers. According to Newbigin, Paul never agonizes about numerical results.²³⁵ Furthermore, the New Testament does not tell us that Jesus' ministry was successful when Jesus has a lot of followers. The large number of crowds deserted Jesus later.

Therefore, the South Korean Protestant churches should focus on a quality-oriented growth. A quality-oriented growth means the multiplication of disciples of Jesus.

²³³ Jung, "Renewing the Church for Mission," 252.

²³⁴ Ibid.

²³⁵ Newbigin, *The Open Secret*, 124-126.

The church is called to make disciples as Jesus did. Jesus' purpose for his three years of earthly ministry was the discipleship and equipping of the twelve disciples. This was his drive and where most of his time was spent. Jesus was focused on the teaching of the Kingdom of God and teaching people to see beyond their present situation to the life to come. Jesus laid down some requirements for disciples. They are intrinsic to the definition of what it means to be a disciple. Jesus said, "If any person is going to follow me, they need to be willing to kill their own desires and take on mine" (Matthew 16:24; Mark 8:34; Luke 9:23). Thus, a disciple must be willing to surrender all personal will and desire. As Jesus said, "No man can serve two masters" (Matthew 6:24), no one can follow their own desire and Jesus at the same time.

Jesus entrusted making disciples to his church that is a community of disciples. Jesus said, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age" (Matthew 28:18-20). Making disciples is the quintessential aspect and reason the church exists. Thus, the South Korean Protestant churches should focus on making disciples who are willing to kill their desires and follow Jesus, rather than making church people who visit their churches every Sunday.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I suggested four tasks to transform the South Korean Protestant churches. The first task is to have new ecclesial models that are the servant model and the

eschatological community model. The second task is to have the principles of interdependence and partnership. The third task is to integrate the proclamation of the gospel with a higher sense of social responsibility. The last task is to change the church growth pattern from quantity-oriented to quality-oriented. If these tasks are implemented, social credibility and the image of church can be improved. In particular, pastors in the South Korean Protestant churches must accept the necessity of these tasks. Since pastor has significant power within the church, many problems in the South Korean Protestant churches can be solved quickly when pastors practice these tasks.

CONCLUSION

Through this thesis I have addressed three aims. First, to analyze the growth and decline of the Korean Protestant churches throughout their history. Second, to investigate three factors that caused the decline of membership in the South Korean Protestant churches—church growth syndrome, church individualism, and conservative theology. Third, to suggest four tasks to transform South Korean Protestant churches—accepting new ecclesial models, having the principles of interdependence and partnership among South Korean Protestant churches, integration proclamation of the gospel with social responsibility, and changing the church growth pattern from quantity-oriented to quality-oriented.

Since the mid 1990s, there have been numerous calls for serious self-reflection on the South Korean Protestant churches; however, the churches always ignored these calls. The analysis, investigation, and suggestions in my thesis might be helpful for the South Korean Protestant churches to implement self-reflection. I believe that the South Korean Protestant churches have a great potential to transform themselves and move beyond their challenges. In South Korea, there are many Protestants who are genuinely open, receptive and committed to moving beyond church growth syndrome, church individualism, and conservative theology. I also hope that true transformation within the South Korean Protestant churches will overflow to broader South Korean society and beyond.

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