

KOREAN PENTECOSTAL SPIRITUALITY:
A CASE STUDY OF JASHIL CHOI¹

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1. Introduction

The majority of sincere Korean believers are carrying out a constant prayer life. Some of them would leave their daily routine, find a secluded place and have a period of prayer and fasting for particular occasions or for the solution of serious problems. As sharers of this spiritual tradition, spirituality of Korean Pentecostals would never be complete, once prayer and fasting were removed. They are two of several key components to build one's spirituality and successful church work. Prayer is a direct communication to and with a divine Being, through which one can keep one's spiritual life and obtain spiritual power to do God's work. If prayer is coupled with fasting, it intensifies one's spiritual life. In turn, the spirituality of individuals, especially of church leaders, directly affects community ministry.

Jashil Choi epitomizes such spirituality among Korean Pentecostals. I met her in the early years of my missionary life. In 1983, on the third year of our lives in the Philippines, Yonggi Cho held a mass public crusade in Manila. Korean residents, students and missionaries enthusiastically participated in the event. On the second day, Jashil Choi, the mother-in-law of Cho, invited several Korean ministers to her hotel room. I had not met her until then. She warmly welcomed us. She also asked us to lay hands on her twisted ankle for a complete healing. At some point, she held my hand and comforted me, as if she had known me for many years. She even handed me a substantial offering for the

¹ This is a shorter version of the paper presented at the International Symposium on Non-western Pentecostalism, May 2001, Anaheim, CA, USA, which will be published in *Spirit and Spirituality: Essays in Honor of Russell P. Spittler*, eds. Wonsuk Ma and Robert P. Menzies (forthcoming).

struggling missionary family. Such a fond memory swelled immediately when I was reading her autobiography.

The book thoroughly delineates her spirituality reflected in her life of prayer and fasting and its effect on her ministry particularly through the Yoido Full Gospel Church (YFGC) and the Choi Jashil International Fasting and Prayer Mountain (CJIFPM). While reading the book, I was often awestruck by extraordinary accounts of her life. Choi's life literally consisted of fasting and prayer often through the night. Each challenging moment of her life and ministry was overcome through her fervent prayer. Having experienced the power of prayer, she was determined to establish a prayer mountain with a distinct emphasis on fasting in spite of the strong opposition of some church leaders. Her determination was so strong that even Cho could not stand in her way, even though every circumstance was not favorable for it.

The evidence of her spirituality was felt strongly from the pioneering year of the YFGC, originally called Full Gospel Central Church, to its growth as the world's largest church. Undoubtedly Yonggi Cho's spiritual leadership single-handedly influenced the development of the church, but he frequently acknowledged the critical role of Choi's sacrificial prayer with fasting in the growth and development of the ministry: "Pastor Choi, my mother-in-law, is the person whom I would never forget in my life. If she was not my pastoral companion I would not be a pastor in the world's largest church."² He sincerely admitted the powerful spiritual and ministerial effect that Choi had on his ministry.

This study is designed to investigate various elements of Choi's spirituality as a representative of Korean Pentecostalism. Her spirituality not only shows her deep spiritual commitment to the Lord, but also a case of creative contextualization of Pentecostal faith.

2. What Is Spirituality?

There are many ways to define spirituality. It can be broad or narrow depending how one comprehends its content. Perhaps a traditional approach to spirituality focuses on seeking the presence of God in prayer, meditation, contemplation and fasting to learn God's heart, desire and adopt his character. This spiritual life is desirous to carry on into a solid

² Yonggi Cho expressed it in the Preface of Jashil Choi, *Nanun Halleluya Ajumma-yutta* [I Was Mrs. Hallelujah] (Seoul: Seoul Books, 1978). The book will be referred to as Choi, *Mrs. Hallelujah*.

pattern of Christian living. It is furthermore encouraged to put into practice to generate the fruit of the Spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness..." (Galatians 5:22-23). It takes over a period of time to bear the fruit in one's Christian life. A tree never bears a single fruit immediately. This implies that spiritual formation does not take place in a split-second but would be perhaps a life-long process. Spirituality would make life worth living and produce a valuable life through reflecting its maturity.

A great Christian thinker C. S. Lewis exerted to form his spiritual life through self-giving, that is, giving of one's whole self to Christ, all personal wishes and precautions. Instead of being self-centered focusing on worldly pleasure or ambition, one has to be honest and humble to be in conformity with good, in other words, giving-up self desire. Lewis contemplates seriously on how one can keep a valuable life. He expresses that "a thistle cannot produce figs. If I am a field that contains nothing but grass-seed, I cannot produce wheat. Cutting the grass may keep it short: but I shall still produce grass and no wheat. If I want to produce wheat, the change must go deeper than the surface. I must be ploughed up and resown."³ Lewis is obviously aware of the value of being good, and this shows his degree of spiritual maturity.

St. Augustine, who was born in North Africa in 354 lived in a monastic community for thirty-four years, confessed his own struggle to build spirituality. He has been considered one of the most significant thinkers in the history of the Christian church. Augustine's spirituality focuses on an ongoing debate to surrender to the will of Christ through which he believed he could get into deep faith. He desired to live according to the will of God but he could not fully conform to it, thus he agonized under such a growing process. He gave an interesting analogy that the mind gives a direction to the body and is obeyed at certain times but when it gives an order to itself, it is not accepted. In other words, when the mind orders the mind to structure an act of will, the order is not obeyed. He further argued that when the mind commands itself to fulfill an act of will, it would not give this order unless it willed to do so. The command is not obeyed because it is not conferred with the brimful will.⁴ As Paul cried out for the struggle of the law of Spirit and body (Rom 7:14-25), Augustine likewise experienced the same degree of dilemma.

³ C. S. Lewis, "Excerpts from Mere Christianity," in *Devotional Classics*, eds. Richard J. Foster and James B. Smith (San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 1993), pp. 7-9.

⁴ St. Augustine, "Excerpts from Confessions," in *Devotional Classics*, pp. 52-53.

His sole desire was to fully conform to the will of God and live according to Christ's will for him. Here the will most likely contains all biblical teachings and following the promise of Christ, thus living a true spiritual life.

Then, how do Pentecostals understand spirituality? Russell P. Spittler, noted for his interest in the subject, consents that spirituality consists of behaviors and contemplation that are learned by the beliefs and values that identify a particular religious fellowship.⁵ Russell presents five specific values ruling Pentecostal spirituality.⁶ Firstly, it refers to personal experience in accomplishing religious contentment. The personal experience, especially for Pentecostals, is truly guided by the presence of the Holy Spirit. Their desire is to know more of God through spiritual journey. Secondly, orality,⁷ for Pentecostals, is one of the important ways to express what the divine Being has accomplished upon their lives in his love, goodness, faithfulness, and mercifulness. For Pentecostals, affective dimension, which is eminently developed, would be demonstrated orally. Thus, Pentecostals value orality as high as the written record in terms of sharing their empirical experience with Jesus Christ. Thirdly, spontaneity is counted as Pentecostal devoutness. Spirituality is being exercised in intensity during worship time. It is because the Holy Spirit came upon those worshippers who waited on and welcomed the Spirit to lead. Thus, Pentecostals cannot keep themselves in silence. Fourthly, the notion of otherworldliness is strongly imbedded in their spiritual life. The true world is not the visible world but the invisible and eternal world. Such perception perhaps more prevails among the grass-root level than the upper-middle class.

⁵ Russell Spittler, "Spirituality, Pentecostal and Charismatic," in *Dictionary of Pentecostal and Charismatic Movement*, eds. Stanley M. Burgess and Gary B. McGee (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1988), p. 804.

⁶ Spittler, "Spirituality," pp. 804-805.

⁷ Also W. J. Hollenweger, "Pentecostal Research: Problems and Promises," in *A Guide to the Study of the Pentecostal Movement*, ed. Charles E. Jones (Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow, 1983), pp. vii-ix.

I have noticed that tribal people in northern Luzon⁸ are fond of songs containing ideas of “hope” and “heaven,” or songs of the Second Coming. Their dire living condition causes them to draw closer to the Savior and to increase their hope in the eternal world. Lastly, making allegiance to biblical authority is one of Pentecostal spiritual characteristics. Their high consideration for biblical authority, diligent leaning to take the message of the scriptures at face value are common among the Pentecostals.⁹ Balancing both beliefs and practices is of significant value that Pentecostals highly regard. Thus, Pentecostal spirituality is not transcendental or philosophical but practical and tangible and such spirituality facilitate to encounter God in a unique way.

3. Choi's Personal Background

Choi was born in 1915 in Haeju City in Hwang-hae Province of North Korea during the Japanese occupation. When she was still young, her father died. Since then she had to take up a heavy responsibility and assist her mother who made a tiny income out of her sewing job. At the age of twelve she and her mother had a chance to attend a tent revival meeting led by Sung-Bong Lee, a well-known Holiness preacher in early Korean Christian history. During this meeting they accepted Christ as their personal Savior. Their great desire was to overcome poverty and become rich. To achieve this goal, Choi entered a nursing school to become a nurse and to work as a midwife as well. During these days nurses earned good money while enjoying a decent life and respect. Choi's diligence and hard work led her close to the goal. She married an affluent and educated man.

After moving to Seoul, South Korea from the North, she opened a new business and it became successful. However, the more money she made the emptier her heart became. And yet, she refused to go to church. Then a tragedy befell her: her mother and the oldest daughter died about a ten-day interval from each other. That incident shook Choi so badly

⁸ There are twelve major tribes and many unknown tribes within six provinces in the mountains of the northern Philippines. Pentecostal churches among the grass-root animistic tribal group of people were established through intensive power manifestation around 1947-1955. For more detail, see Julie C. Ma, *When the Spirit Meets the Spirits: Pentecostal Ministry among the Kankanaey Tribe in the Philippines* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2000).

⁹ Spittler, “Spirituality,” p. 805.

that she had complex illnesses. She interpreted it as a penalization from God for her ambition and worldly desire and for her life from him. Coincidentally her business went down miserably. In 1956, she attempted to kill herself as she was losing her hope to live.

During this desperate period, she turned to the Lord. She headed to a prayer mountain where a famous revival speaker Sung-Bong Lee was conducting a revival meeting. There she came back to the Lord. Lee's message strongly ministered to her heart and helped her open to the Holy Spirit. During the prayer time she experienced fire running through her body from above and her tongue became twisted and spoke in a strange language. The Holy Spirit baptized her. She had a true encounter with the Lord and made a commitment to him. She entered the Full Gospel Bible College to prepare for her future ministry.¹⁰

4. Prayer and Fasting in Choi's Life

The spirituality of Choi's life can be deduced to two key components: prayer and fasting. This spiritual practice has been long recognized as vital in a Christian life. According to Roberta C. Bondi, prayer is the fundamental reality of Christian lives. Prayer actualizes believers as they discover their focus in God.¹¹ Prayer leads God's people into growth knowledge of, and deepening love for, God. E. M. Bounds notes that prayer has to be the basis of Christian character, their life and living. This is Christ's law of prayer, forming it into the very being of the Christian. It should be the primary step and breath.¹²

Thus,

Prayer is the Christian's vital breath,
The Christian's native air;
His watchword at the gates of death;
He enters heaven with prayer.¹³

¹⁰ For more details, see, Choi, *Mrs. Hallelujah*, pp. 1-125.

¹¹ Roberta C. Bondi, *To Pray and to Love* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991), p. 12.

¹² E. M. Bounds, *The Complete Works of on Prayer* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1995), p. 247.

¹³ Bondi, *To Pray and to Love*, p. 247.

Choi, in her book, *Way of Receiving Answer*,¹⁴ illustrates the power of prayer found in Exodus 17:8-16. Israel's war against the invading Amalekites at Rephidm was entirely depending on Moses' praying hands. If he continually held up his hands, victory was on the Israelites, but when his hands came down the enemy won. To win the battle, Moses had to sit on a stone while his assistants held Moses' hands up. Choi emphasizes the importance of unceasing prayer particularly in the midst of difficulties in life.

Choi's prayer life was shaped during her Bible school years. Her life, in a sense, could have been exciting to be a student in her old age, but it was not so. She was full of responsibilities including leaving her children to someone else's care and supporting them. Such a difficult situation drew her closer to God and her spirituality in prayer was developed. Choi not only prayed in designated hours she set up but also prayed constantly. She recalled the time when Yonggi Cho was terribly ill of tuberculosis during the Bible school days. While no one paid any attention to, or cared for, him, she showed her affection toward him with intense prayer for his healing.¹⁵ Perhaps this incident encouraged them to cultivate a close relationship with each other. Her spirituality was not just confined to her private life but was often demonstrated in her life of ministry. Such display of concern for people was part of her spiritual exercise.

Choi fasted as often as her spirit was led. She firmly believed that fasting could draw one closer to the divine presence and offer more powerful prayer. As a result, problems were solved rather quickly through intense prayer and fasting. She quickly found that fasting helps immensely to develop personal benefits.

Arthur Wallis believes that spirituality is exercised in a form of fasting for enduement of power, for spiritual gifts and for physical healing, and specific answers to prayer.¹⁶ Choi also argued similarly on the prominence of fasting. This discovery was made through her long and deep spiritual journey. Her desire for sound spiritual life through prayer and fasting led her to the establishment of a prayer mountain dedicated to fasting. Long and intensive prayer with frequent fasting naturally characterized this process. The more time she spent in prayer and fasting,

¹⁴ Jashil Choi, *How to Pray for Answer* (in Korean; Seoul: Seoul Books, 1997), p. 11.

¹⁵ Choi, *Mrs. Hallelujah*, pp. 147-52.

¹⁶ Arthur Wallis, *God's Chosen Fast* (Fort Washington, PA: Christian Literature Crusade, 1968), pp. 55-59.

the stronger her faith became for the very first prayer mountain with distinct emphasis on fasting.

In the meantime, she began to search for a good location for prayer facilities. While she was praying and fasting, one night she clearly heard the voice of God directing her to a parcel of land for the prayer mountain. The place had been a cemetery for many years and she might have felt a strong reluctance to bringing it to the board. However, when she made an immediate visit to the place called Osan-ni village, she knelt down on her knees on the barren ground surrounded by graves and prayed. After her daily ministry in the fast growing church pastored by Yonggi Cho, she alone came to the cemetery and spent hours in prayer every night.¹⁷ A woman with no company praying in the desolate field must have been a strange sight. It demonstrated her unreserved trust in God's promise and her commitment toward him. These short accounts of her early life and ministry would suffice to illustrate her unique spiritual life.

5. Effect of Choi's Spirituality to Her Ministry

5.1 Personal Evangelism

Choi had a marvelous heart for serving lost souls. She always availed herself to be used for the work of the God's kingdom. During her training in the Bible school, she took every opportunity to bring the unsaved to Christ. Donald Whitney points that evangelism is an intrinsic overflow of the Christian life. It is also the call of a *disciple* that all Christians should follow the Lord not only in obedience but also in evangelism. Each Christian, therefore, has to be active in witnessing rather than waiting for a moment to come.¹⁸ Matthew 5:16 fits well this context: "Let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven." Whitney correctly interprets that to "let" the light shine before others means more than "don't do anything to keep your light from shining." The closest rendering is: "Let there be the light of good works shining in your life, let there be the evidence of God-honoring change radiating from you. Let it begin! Make room for it!"¹⁹ Choi's unique strategy was to approach children for

¹⁷ Choi, *Mrs. Hallelujah*, pp. 429-33.

¹⁸ Donald Whitney, *Spiritual Disciples for the Christian Life* (Colorado Spring, CO: NavPress, 1993), p. 100.

¹⁹ Whitney, *Spiritual Disciples*, p. 100.

evangelism. Choi had a natural ability to draw children to her. Even in evangelism, prayer was the bedrock for her ministry. She in fact spent more time in prayer and fasting than in actual evangelism.

In 1957 Choi graduated from the Bible school but was not certain about her future ministry. In order for her to discover God's direction, she fervently prayed with fasting for many days. At one point Choi seriously considered operating an orphanage since she had a heart for children, but soon learned that it was not God's best intention for her. Nonetheless, Choi continually exerted herself in children's evangelism. Her autobiography includes many incidents that illustrate her love for the souls of children. Every night her intense prayer always included children.²⁰

She gradually expanded her evangelistic activity for adults. Each Sunday Choi already had about 70 attendances in fellowship plus a good number of children. As there was no suitable place, their gathering often took place under a pine tree. Thus, rainy days posed extreme challenges. Once in her regular prayer time in a quiet place, she heard the voice of God instructing her to start a tent church. "Hearing God's voice" was a regular part of her prayer life.

The Bible provides a good number of cases where people spent time to listen to God. 1 Kings 19:11-13 notes Elijah's effort to hear the gentle voice of God in a segregated Mount Horeb. Habakkuk (2:1) also stood on the guard post and kept attention to see or hear what God would speak to him.

The depth of Choi's faith and trust was almost comparable with Bible characters particularly in her desire and endurance to hear the divine voice. Bounds contends that in prayer trust in faith becomes absolute, validated, accomplished. Trust is solid belief and faith in "full flower." It is an alert act, a fact of which believers are sensible. According to the biblical notion it is the eye of the infant soul, and the ear of the regenerated soul. Such belief brings no wakefulness of their presence, no "joy unspeakable and full of glory" results from their exertion.²¹ Christ showed that trust is the basic foundation of prayer. The central issue of Christ's ministry and work was his unreserved trust in his Father. When trust is complete, prayer is simply outstretched hand ready to receive.²² Trust always operates not in the past but in the present tense.

²⁰ Choi, *Mrs. Hallelujah*, p. 213.

²¹ Bounds, *The Complete Works of on Prayer*, p. 24.

²² Bounds, *The Complete Works of on Prayer*, p. 26.

With God's assurance Choi began to proceed immediately. She rushed to a tent store to purchase one. A set in those days was not inexpensive. Even though the tent was not of good quality, with joy bubbling the tent was pitched in the outskirt of Seoul surrounded by makeshift houses and graves. Her zeal for soul-winning increased, and many were added to the kingdom.

5.2 Sensitivity to Felt Needs

Choi found herself frequently caring for the needy and sick. Residents around the church were extremely poor, many were physically ill, and some neighbors were demon-possessed. One day a poor family invited her to visit the mother had been greatly suffering for seven years with a severe case of paralytic. To make her situation worse, the mother had given a birth recently and was not able to afford to buy nutritious food for recuperation. As a result, she was very sick. When Choi entered the room, strong odor caused nausea and she almost threw up. She immediately prayed to get over the difficult smell and embraced the family with love. The Lord spoke into her heart, "Do not just ask for love, get water and wash her body."²³ Upon hearing the voice of God, Choi washed the malodorous body of the woman and even her children.

Her deep spirituality is a tangible embodiment of what Abba Poemen's stated:

There is nothing greater in love than that a (person) lay down (that person's) life for his (or her) neighbor. When a (person) hears a complaining word and struggles against himself (or herself) and does not...begin to complain; when a (person) bears an injury with patience, and does not look for revenge; that is when a (person) lays down his (or her) life for his (or her) neighbors.²⁴

Bondi characterizes God's love not as the love of a disinterest and just king for his aloof subjects. It is close, tender and defenseless, as a mother's is for her child.²⁵ Choi's action revealed the genuine love of God toward her neighbor in an extreme need. Choi often cried with pain in her heart for this family. With compassion she constantly visited them and offered deep prayers for their healing as well as conversion. The

²³ Choi, *Mrs. Hallelujah*, p. 227.

²⁴ Bondi, *To Pray and to Love*, p. 112.

²⁵ Bondi, *To Pray and to Love*, p. 29.

family's situation was worsened by the heavy drinking of her husband day and night who never paid any attention to the family. Choi, even in her own financial difficulty, brought bread and rice for the family.²⁶ She understood how God treats the poor: "Has not God chosen those who are poor in the eyes of the world to be rich in faith and to inherit the kingdom..." (James 2:5). Verse 6 continues, "But you have insulted the poor." Matthew records the attitude of the Lord: "If you want to be perfect, go, sell your possessions and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven..." (Matt 9:21).

In a similar way, George Soares Prabhu argues that to be a follower of Christ means experiencing God the way that Jesus had experienced God. One essential element for Christian self-definition is the experience of God's love, which encourages us to love in effectual compassion to those in want.²⁷ The poor are indeed the object of God's concern and care. To appropriate God's compassion toward the needy is an important element of Christian spirituality.

Choi's spirituality is a good example. It was expressed in cleaning smelly rooms and bathing children regularly. In addition, she once fasted for three days for the mother's healing and the salvation of the entire family. She constantly read the Bible and prayed to encourage her faith. Through her persevering prayer, the paralytic woman began to rise and take fragile steps. Awesome divine power was manifested. Fifteen days later the woman was able to work for the family. Such events caused others to open their eyes and come to the Lord.

Choi was assured of the power of fasting in supplication for healing. She expounded the prominence of fasting in prayer in her book,²⁸ *How to Pray for Answer*, drawing examples from the scriptures. Hezekiah was her outstanding example. He was a spiritual man who put total trust in the Lord for the peace of the nation (2 King 18:6). When he was fatally ill to die, he wept bitterly to God for healing. His supplication resulted in divine grace and his life was expanded by fifteen more years.

5.3 Spiritual Warfare

²⁶ Choi, *Mrs. Hallelujah*, pp. 232-33.

²⁷ George Soares Prabhu, "The Jesus of Faith: A Christological Contribution to an Ecumenical Third World Spirituality," in *Spirituality of the Third World*, eds. K. C. Abraham and Bernadette Mbuy-Beya (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1994), p. 153.

²⁸ Choi, *How to Pray for Answer*, pp. 105-106.

Throughout her ministry, Choi encountered many demon-possession cases. After a Sunday worship service, a member from a neighboring church rushed asking Choi to visit her friend who had been tormented by a terrible sickness. The sick woman was not a Christian and she was always referred to shamans for healing and advice. One day the shaman gave a striking “revelation”: if she fails to become a shaman through a special ritual, she would die soon. Upon hearing such a dreadful verdict, her family fiercely opposed the idea. She out of great anxiety shared her problem with her Christian friend.²⁹ It proves that Choi was quite well known in the area as a woman filled with the Spirit as she had an earnest desire to minister to people who were going through difficulties.

Bounds notes that religion has to do with everything but our hearts. It requires our hands and feet to give full devotion. It takes hold of our voices to praise. It lays its hands on our material concern. But it does not take hold of personal affections, desires and enthusiasm.³⁰ One may add to it that our sincere heart is not only for worship and praise but also to serve with our hands and feet with it, laying down human selfishness and fervor.

Choi and her ministry partner Yonggi Cho were brought to the house of the sick woman. When they entered the room, she suddenly sat down and stared at them like an angry rooster. Choi and the accompanying members quietly sat on the floor and began to sing hymns. Choi instantaneously knew that Satan attempted to attack.³¹ Ephesians 6:10-20 well states such a spiritual struggle. Believers are caught in the idea of eschatological tension that is “already, but not yet.” Apostle Paul was well aware of two different realms of power: God and the devil. It is also obvious that the world as the dominion of darkness is on one side, while Christ, Christians, the power and authority of God on the other.³² With this understanding, Choi and her group sang continually and rebuked the evil spirit in the woman with the authority of Christ. In the middle of singing and prayer, the woman abruptly uttered in Japanese, “Let’s go. Let’s go to Japan.” (Choi spoke Japanese like many Koreans who received Japanese occupation.) Then she seemed to be back to normal.

²⁹ Choi, *Mrs. Hallelujah*, pp. 315-16.

³⁰ Bounds, *The Complete Works of on Prayer*, p. 92.

³¹ Choi, *Mrs. Hallelujah*, p. 317.

³² Clinton E. Arnold, *Ephesians: Power and Magic* (Grand Rapid, MI: Baker, 1992), pp. 156-57.

The Japanese language was spoken not by the woman but by Satan. According to the woman, she had gone to Japan for study when she was a young girl and had stayed there for several years. During this period she became a member of a religious group. Then she returned to Korea and married a man. When she was pregnant with a first child, she was terribly ill and the sickness continued until Choi's ministry. Through the power of God displayed in prayer, the woman was delivered from her bondage. Such manifestation of God's power led her entire family and relatives to the Lord.

Power encounter is a regular part of Christian spiritual life especially among Pentecostals. Thus, the concept has been used among Asian Christians without question. But some believers feel reluctant to use such a term because of its military connotation. This term was first used by Alan Tippett to refer to a conflict between the kingdom of God and the kingdom of Satan.³³ It frequently takes place especially among tribal groups who believe in the spiritual world, and the involvement of the spirits in their life. During the ministry of Jesus, he drove out many demons from people. The demonstration of God's power was also frequent in the Old Testament. One of the outstanding instances is the story of Elijah, confronting the four hundred and fifty prophets of Baal on Mount Carmel (1 Kings 18:16-45). Oscar Cullmann notes that Satan still has great power, power that can destroy any human being and his or her plan if they remained without encumbrance.³⁴ Thus, divine power and authority is essential for effective work in God's kingdom. John Wimber argues that unity also facilitates the believers to experience God's power.³⁵ In the Book of Acts, when believers came together in one accord, the power of God was manifested.

It is well noted that Choi's spiritual exercise with prayer and fasting played a significant role in her successful evangelistic ministry.

5.4 Establishment of the Prayer Mountain

The church she had pioneered with Yonggi Cho in the outskirts of Seoul moved to town to accommodate the growing members. After the move, soon the membership grew to 18,000, and the growth continued

³³ Alan R. Tippett, *People Movements in Southern Polynesia* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1971), p. 81.

³⁴ Oscar Cullmann, *Christ and Time* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1964), p. 64.

³⁵ John Wimber and Kevin Springer, *Power Evangelism* (New York: HarperCollins, 1984), p. 58.

during the next seven years. For these exceptional years of church growth, Cho was perfectly complemented by Choi's spiritual insights and gifts. The church became particularly known for its healing ministry. When the church held a tent revival meeting together with missionary Sam Todd. About 200 people received healing.³⁶

As the church constantly grew in number, Cho and the church began to search for another location for a new church building. When Yoido Island was suggested, odds were against Cho. First, Yoido was too far from the city center, and the future of the deserted military airfield was uncertain. This challenge took Choi frequently to a prayer mountain near Seoul. While she was imploring to God for the future of the church, suddenly the idea of starting a prayer mountain for her own church entered her mind. She immediately noticed that it was not merely a human thought but was from God. With this assurance Choi prayed everyday for God's direction. In addition to the huge finance needs, the timing seemed to be wrong: the church was preparing for a new and huge facility. However, Choi did not abandon the vision. In fact, the vision grew stronger through her prayer. Every night she went to the cemetery in Osan-ri and spent her time in prayer. Through the ministry of the prayer mountain, she wanted to bring the people of God to a prayer life.³⁷

Yonggi Cho more than once underscored the importance of prayer: "We Koreans have made prayer our first priority. From prayer has come communion and fellowship with the Holy Spirit. Today the Holy Spirit guides us in our daily lives, and we have power with God through prayer."³⁸ Bondi had a holistic view of prayer: the possibilities of prayer influence all things. Whatever deals with people's highest well-being, and whatever has to do with God's scheme and will concerning human beings on earth, is a subject for prayer. Prayer opens doors for the access of the gospel.³⁹

In addition to the financial challenge, some leaders of the church questioned the choice of the location. First of all it was located in the northern part that was too close to the border with North Korea. In case of a North Korean invasion, the area could be devastated instantly. Secondly, there was no running water or trees but only graves. Such

³⁶ Choi, *Mrs. Hallelujah*, pp. 355-56.

³⁷ Choi, *Mrs. Hallelujah*, pp. 415-32.

³⁸ Yonggi Cho, "Prayer Can Change the Course of Your Life," *Pentecostal Evangel*, Oct. 18, 1998, p. 11.

³⁹ Bondi, *To Pray and to Love*, p. 163.

negative feedback caused Choi to feel that the prayer mountain no longer seemed a possibility. She was indeed despondent. One day she spent the whole night with some church members in prayer. During her prayer, God gave her scriptures that uplifted her enormously: John 14:1, “Do not let your hearts be troubled. Trust in God; trust also in me.” Also Philippians 2:13, 14 was another passage: “For it is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose. Do everything without complaining or arguing....” From these verses Choi was assured that God would accomplish this vision through her.⁴⁰ It is rather common among Pentecostals to expect the “leading of the Spirit”: Pentecostals have a sense of hearing what the Spirit is speaking to them not only through the word of God but also through a personal encounter with God.

The Lord showed a clear sign of his will: People from different places flocked into Osan-ri that was not yet purchased and was still barren. Those people who came prayed with fasting and this became a rule for this prayer mountain. Soon this place began to attract people from Japan and other parts of the world, and they discovered a new spiritual dimension through prayer with fasting. The Osan-ri Prayer Mountain became the first international facility for prayer and fasting. An increasing number of the sick came to experience divine healing. Soon many experienced healing from incurable sicknesses through intensive and fervent prayer accompanied with fasting. Such news soon spread throughout the nation and more people who were in a desperate situation came to pray.

An emphasis on the power of prayer and fasting became the hallmark of Choi’s spirituality. Joel 2:12 notes the significance of fasting “Yet even now,” says the Lord, “return to me with all your heart, with fasting....” 1 Kings 21:27-29 also illustrates a similar point. After the murder of Naboth and Ahab’s obligatory obtainment of his vineyard, God sent Elijah to declare divine judgment upon him. “When Ahab heard those words, he rent his clothes, and put sackcloth upon his flesh, and fasted.” God then declared, “Because he has humbled himself before me, I will not bring evil in his days; but in his son’s days” (1 Kings 21:27-29). Judgment was postponed because even such an evil person as Ahab humbled himself by fasting. God’s mercy is never limited to only righteous people but is extended to anyone who seeks God’s mercy. Fasting displays how earnestly the people of God are who pray to him especially in times of need. Arthur Wallis notes that fasting makes prayer ascend up as on eagle’s wings. It is meant to usher the supplicant into the

⁴⁰ Choi, *Mrs. Hallelujah*, pp. 432-33.

spectators' room of the Lord and to extend to him the golden scenery. It may be anticipated to drive back the oppressing powers of darkness and loosen their grip on the prayer objective. It is counted to give a brim to a man's intercessions and power to his petitions. The Lord is eager to listen when someone prays with fasting.⁴¹

Undoubtedly fasting is an important aspect of Christian life. Fasting is often an ultimate form of earnest and extended supplication. In the CJIFPM, originally called the Osan-ri Prayer Mountain, some fasted even for forty days. It is a spiritual wrestling between the supplicant and the divine Being. Andrew Murray affirms that "fasting helps to express, to deepen, and to confirm the resolution that we are ready to sacrifice anything, to sacrifice ourselves to attain what we seek for the kingdom of God."⁴²

Such testimonies and the increasing number of visitors to Osan-ri, even though it was desolate, moved the hearts of church leaders to establish the prayer mountain. Ultimately, however, it was the Holy Spirit who accomplished the vision. During the early period of the prayer mountain, Choi fasted as frequent as three days a week. This exemplary prayer life has encouraged many to follow her example and many have drawn into deep spiritual experiences.

5.5 Choi's International Ministry

Choi's spiritual ministry soon crossed national boundaries and expanded to other countries. God opened a door for her to reach Japanese as church leaders repeatedly invited her. Prior to her preaching, Choi customarily spent a whole night in prayer for the next day's service. The effect of prayer was so evident that many people in the service were filled with the Holy Spirit. Also a variety of manifestations of the Spirit took place regularly. Choi's anointed message accompanied with the work of the Spirit impacted many Japanese churches. Common themes of her message were repentance, prayer and the Spirit-led life. When she visited a place, Choi eagerly ministered in churches as many as she could and offered a marvelous ministry. Her autobiography illustrates her eagerness as well. The Spirit was at work particularly in healing, and often unprecedented miracles took place. Soon many with sicknesses in Japan began to visit the prayer mountain in Osan-ri and spent days in

⁴¹ Wallis, *God's Chosen Fast*, p. 50.

⁴² Wallis, *God's Chosen Fast*, p. 50.

prayer and fasting. Variety of spiritual gifts were manifested including speaking in tongues and interpretation.

Many in the United States were called for ministry through her influence. Her ministry in Thailand, Hong Kong, Germany and other places produced similar results. Choi's international ministry was also her commitment to the missionary call found in Acts 1:8, "But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."⁴³

Prior to such trips, Choi spent two or three weeks for prayer and fasting. It was not only preparing for a forthcoming ministry but also making herself a living message of God's power through prayer and fasting."

6. Assessment of Choi's Spirituality

6.1 Her Influences to Korean Christianity

As discussed above, Choi's distinctive spirituality had strong implications to her ministry: it was founded on prayer and fasting. Perhaps it is fair to say that such spirituality had been part of the spiritual tradition in various religions and particularly in Korean Christianity. In the early revival in Pyongyang (1939), for instance, the entire 3,000 members in Suemooon Church fasted while praying the whole night. The preacher was Jun Jasun, one of great evangelists. Such an incident affected the members to encounter the power of the Holy Spirit, repentance and a spiritual renewal.⁴⁴

During the post-exilic period in the Old Testament, Jews commonly fasted as a form of prayer, and fasting became part of their spirituality. Even in New Testament times Jews frequently fasted (Matt 6:16-18). Thus, fasting is a long Jewish tradition.

However, Choi's practice of prayer and fasting may not strictly be identified with the Jewish practice. As everyone would agree, prayer is an essential part of Christian spiritual life. But fasting requires additional commitment and effort. Perhaps an experience of fasting or two, especially in a desperate circumstance, could be possible without much

⁴³ Choi, *Mrs. Hallelujah*, pp. 437-60.

⁴⁴ International Theological Institutes, *A History of the Korean Assemblies of God* (in Korean; Seoul: Seoul Books, 1998), pp. 183-84.

serious discipline. However, fasting regularly as part of one's spiritual life was probably a new concept at least in Korean Christianity. From the beginning of her Christian life, she considered fasting very important for cultivating her spiritual growth and development of an intimate relationship with the Lord. This also led her to wider and deeper spiritual experiences. For instance, before engaging in cases of demon possession, she fasted with fervent prayer. She frequently experienced God's power to drive out the demon. Thus, one can acknowledge the importance of fasting in spiritual warfare. Fasting also enhanced many Christian works such as evangelism, preaching, missions, church growth, healing and solving diverse problems. As discussed above Choi's ministry was characterized by prayer and fasting. In fact, her spiritual leadership and contribution through her intense prayer and fasting was an integral part of the unprecedented growth of the YFGC. Yonggi Cho acknowledges it openly, "...if she was not my co-worker, I am not able to accomplish such a successful pastoral ministry now."⁴⁵

6.2 Challenges of Choi's Spirituality

Fasting and prayer has been the main feature of Choi's spirituality. Her deep communion with God through prayer and fasting greatly heightened her sensitivity in the Spirit. Choi's unique spirituality, especially through her prayer mountain ministry, set forth a new paradigm for Christian spirituality, and this became identified as Korean Pentecostal spirituality. Her teaching of prayer and fasting spread quickly to the entire Korean Christianity and beyond, not only through the prayer mountain but also her popular conferences she conducted in various countries. One such conference was in Jerusalem in October 1980. Around 500 people came from different countries and had a four-day prayer rally with fasting. Thirty-four ministers from South Africa attended this conference and experienced a deep working of the Spirit. The participants learned how to pray with fasting and this became a significant part of their spiritual life as well as their churches. Consequently, fasting has been a common or even important spiritual/religious tradition across countries. I have seen an American, for example, fast for one day before he delivered a special lecture.

Her life-long devotion to, and campaign for, prayer and fasting changed the spiritual paradigm of the Korean church forever. Her life and ministry demonstrated that prayer is not just part of the Christian life but

⁴⁵ Preface of Choi, *Mrs. Hallelujah*.

prayer *is* the Christian life. When prayer is accompanied by fasting, the intensity of prayer is significantly enhanced. It is because fasting signifies a total surrender to God and serious commitment to the prayer itself. The example of Jesus shows this clearly in the Gospels. In the desert, he prepared himself for the Messianic mission in prayer with forty-day fasting. After a long period of prayer he returned to Galilee in the power of the Spirit and was ready to launch his earthly mission (Luke 4:14). The unique spirituality of Choi is something that the people of God must adapt and apply to their spiritual life. Such a spiritual exercise is perhaps more required in increasingly secularized modern societies so that the church can be the true light in the darkened postmodern era.

7. Summary

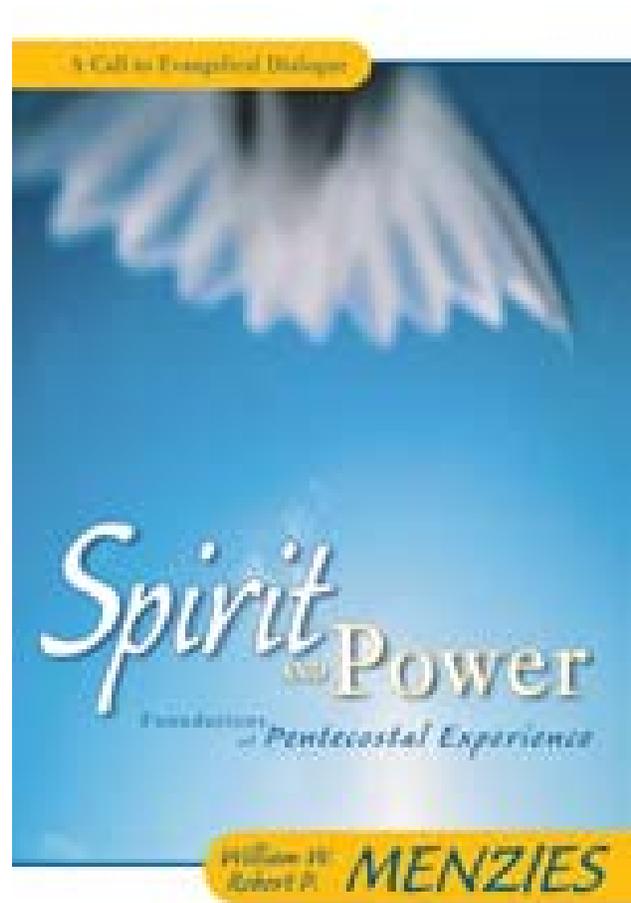
Choi's distinctive spirituality has been investigated in this paper. Everywhere she went, her prayer life with fasting impacted practically millions of believers through her pastoral and international ministries. Subsequently several more prayer mountains with special emphasis on fasting were established sometimes by herself, but many others by people who had been impacted by her ministry. Until her death, prayer and fasting became the hallmark of her life and ministry. I was personally amazed by her solid spiritual devotion, prayer with fasting, and how deeply it was laid in her life.

I personally received a tantamount challenge from her life of prayer and fasting. Fasting is particularly difficult for me. I have done it a few occasions but as years went by, that laborious exercise has slowly disappeared from my spiritual life. However, as I studied Choi's spirituality, I came to realize the significance of fasting. As a consequence, prayer and fasting slowly became part of my spiritual journey.

Many believers, who were influenced by Choi, were boldly involved in extensive fasting. Particularly members of the YFGC have been well taught. Cell group heads and church leaders are taken to the CJIFPM on the very first days of the new year to pray and fast. In fact regular bus trips leave the church many times a day to the prayer mountain. I witnessed many ride a bus to spend at least a night for prayer right after the church service. Spirituality is human response to God, prompted by

theology's intersection with believers' real life.⁴⁶ Choi's life and ministry was shaped through an intense and continuous interaction between God and his children. Surely prayer is one of the most meaningful ways to experience the presence of God. Choi taught us how to have a more successful and deeper experience through fasting. My prayer is that Choi's rich spiritual legacy and heritage would continue to encourage and challenge many believers to cultivate their spirituality through prayer and fasting. There is nothing more important in the Christian life than experiencing God himself on a regular basis.

⁴⁶ Leslie C. Allen, "Spirituality of the Psalms" (William Menzies annual lectureship, Asia Pacific Theological Seminary, Baguio, Philippines, January 2001), p. 3.



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