

## THE MISSIOLOGICAL CHALLENGE OF DAVID YONGGI CHO'S THEOLOGY<sup>1</sup>

Hwa Yung

### 1. Introduction

The story of Dr. David Yonggi Cho and the Yoido Full Gospel Church (YFGC) is well-known throughout the world. Cho comes from the Evangelical and Pentecostal tradition.<sup>2</sup> His theological teachings and ministerial practices are many faceted. The concern of this paper is to focus on the implications of Cho's theology for Christian mission today.

The primary task here is therefore not to examine Cho's teachings as a whole, but to critique those aspects of his theology that are relevant to mission in the twenty-first century. This paper will therefore begin by laying down what is deemed to be an appropriate set of criteria for a theology that would enhance mission. It will then go on to examine to what extent Cho's theology fulfills these criteria. Suggestions will also be offered as to how a more careful reformulation of his teachings would increase the missiological impact of his theology.

### 2. What Constitutes a Missiological Theology?

In order to examine the missiological implications of Cho's theology, we need first to look at what mission is and why Christian theology properly conceived must be missiological and pastoral in orientation.

---

<sup>1</sup> An earlier version of the paper was presented in the First Young San International Theological Symposium, 26-27 Sept 2002, Hansei University, Seoul.

<sup>2</sup> The church belongs to the Assembly of God denomination.

What is mission? In the twentieth century there have been intense debates on this question. At one time, conservatives emphasized primarily evangelism and church growth, and liberals or radicals social concerns and political action. But it is increasingly recognized that mission is holistic. It involves both the vertical dimension, which concerns our need to be reconciled to God, as well as the horizontal dimension, which deals with reconciliation between human beings. Further, mission is the proclamation of the kingdom of God and the lordship of Christ over all of life. It involves calling individuals to repentance and faith in him, deliverance for those in bondage to demonic powers and diseases, and bringing Christ's love to the weak, needy, broken-hearted and hungry, as well as God's righteousness and justice to a world wherein suffering and oppression is rife. Thus mission involves evangelism, healing and deliverance ministries, social concerns and political action for justice in a broken world.<sup>3</sup>

In what follows, we will examine this understanding of mission in greater detail. But before doing so, I would like to draw attention to the nature of theology, which is that it must be fundamentally rooted in mission and pastoral practice.

## 2.1 Theology as Missiological and Pastoral

One of the unfortunate aspects of theology today is that much theological writing has degenerated into an academic exercise, often unrelated to the life and mission of the church. In part this is due to the influence of Enlightenment thinking in the western intellectual tradition. Under the Kantian paradigm, building upon Greek idealism, "pure" or "theoretical" reason took priority over "practical" reason. This helps accentuate the shift from theology as "practical" to theology as "speculative." Thus much of western systematic theology today is quite

---

<sup>3</sup> What is stated here is representative of an increasing number of evangelicals in their thinking concerning the mission of the church. See e.g., John R. W. Stott, *Christian Mission in the Modern World* (London: Falcon Books, 1975); C. Rene Padilla, *Mission between the Times: Essay on the Kingdom* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1985); Ronald J. Sider, *One-Sided Christianity? Uniting the Church to Heal a Lost and Broken World* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1993); Vinay Samuel and Chris Sugden, eds., *Mission as Transformation: A Theology of the Whole Gospel* (Oxford: Regnum, 2000); A. Scott Moreau, et. al., *Deliver Us from Evil: An Uneasy Frontier in Christian Mission* (Monrovia, CA: MARC, 2002).

unrelated to the mission and pastoral concerns of the church.<sup>4</sup> But, properly understood, this is not what theology should be. Rather, at its best, theology has always been rooted in the mission and pastoral ministry of the church.

This emphasis is clearly seen in the New Testament records. Every book therein was written in response to some evangelistic or pastoral need of the church. As George Peters puts it, “the Bible is not a book about theology as such, but rather, a record of theology in mission—God in action on behalf of the salvation of mankind.”<sup>5</sup> Or, as David J. Bosch argues, the New Testament books were not written by the equivalent of modern-day scholars writing at leisure. Rather they were written “in the context of an ‘emergency situation,’ of a church which, because of its missionary encounter with the world, was forced to theologize.”<sup>6</sup>

The same thing can be said of theology in the early church. Reflecting on the writings of many of the church fathers, Jaroslav Pelikan asserts that “when the church confessed what it believed and taught, it did so in answer to attacks from within and from without the Christian movement.”<sup>7</sup> In other words, the Patristic fathers wrote out of the dual concerns, on the one hand, of dealing with heresies and other pastoral problems within the Christian community and, on the other, of defending the church from external attacks by pagans as well as commending the gospel to them.

We may go on to point out that this emphasis of rooting theology in mission and sound pastoral practice has also characterized the church during the most vibrant periods of its history, including the Reformation and the eighteenth century Evangelical revivals.<sup>8</sup> It is therefore not an

---

<sup>4</sup> See discussion in David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1991), pp. 420-51; Randy L. Maddox, “John Wesley—Practical Theologian?” *Wesley Theological Journal* 23 (1988), pp. 122-147.

<sup>5</sup> George W. Peters, *A Biblical Theology of Missions* (Chicago, IL: Moody, 1972), p. 9.

<sup>6</sup> Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, p. 16.

<sup>7</sup> Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Christian Tradition: A History of the Development of Doctrine. The Emergence of the Catholic Tradition (100-600)* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1971), p. 11.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. Maddox, “John Wesley,” pp. 122-47.

exaggeration for Martin Kahler to assert that mission is “the mother of theology.”<sup>9</sup>

## 2.2 What Is the Measure of a Missiological Theology?

If theology must be missiological how do we assess whether the works of a particular writer is indeed so? The test of such a theology would be whether it empowers and enhances the church in its life and mission. If that is so, then it must fulfill at least three criteria. The first is that it should help the church to be effective in its evangelism and pastoral ministry. Second, it should empower the church to act effectively in social transformation. And thirdly, it must take culture seriously. Briefly, I will give my reasons for each of these.<sup>10</sup>

Except for those Christians who accept more radical interpretations of the faith, little needs to be said about the importance of evangelism. Until the advent of liberal theology in the modern period, it has always been taken seriously by the church—even if at times Christians have approached it in a spirit that is very different from that of Christ. It involves the verbal proclamation of the gospel, and the calling of men and women to repentance and salvation in Christ. Often it also involves power encounters through prophecy, healing, exorcism or some other supernatural acts. Converts must then be disciplined, nurtured to maturity in Christ and brought into communities of faith through proper and effective pastoral care. This is what church growth is all about. The more liberal and radical segments of the church today continue to reject this as relevant to mission. But that does not change the fact that this is rooted in the ministry and teachings of Jesus Christ and the apostles in the New Testament. Therefore, the first criterion of a missiological theology is that it should enhance the work of evangelism and pastoral oversight.

The gospel however is not only about personal salvation in a mere spiritual sense. It is also about Christ coming to redeem the whole world. Salvation therefore is personal, social, global and cosmic. As noted earlier, for much of the twentieth century, Evangelicals forgot Christ’s command to love our neighbor, and failed to recognize his concern for the poor and needy, and for social righteousness and justice in the world. But there has been an abundance of studies in recent years by

---

<sup>9</sup> Cited in Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, p. 16. I have also argued this point at length in Yung Hwa, *Mangoes or Bananas? The Quest for an Authentic Asian Christian Theology* (Oxford: Regnum, 1997), pp. 18-26.

<sup>10</sup> For a much more detail treatment, see Hwa, *Mangoes or Bananas?* pp. 61-145.

Evangelicals to point us back in the right direction.<sup>11</sup> The Lausanne Covenant sums this corrective up succinctly in its paragraph on “Christian Social Responsibility”:

Although reconciliation with man is not reconciliation with God, nor is political liberation salvation, nevertheless we affirm that evangelism and socio-political involvement are both part of our Christian duty. For both are necessary expressions of our doctrines of God and man, our love for our neighbor and our obedience to Jesus Christ.<sup>12</sup>

Thus if a theology is missiological, it must also empower the church in the task of social transformation.

The third criterion for a missiological theology is whether it takes the culture of the recipient of the gospel message seriously. This has emerged as one of the key issues in modern missiological discussions. Increasingly it has been recognized that western missions in the last two centuries have often been ethnocentric, with too much emphasis given to the supposed superiority of western culture and ignoring the integrity of other cultures. This resulted in the gospel often being given in an alien manner to those in the non-western world, thus causing unnecessary cultural offense. Chinese intellectuals in the early part of the last century used to mock Christians with the saying, “One more Christian, one less Chinese!”

One of the key elements of the gospel is the doctrine of incarnation. Jesus Christ, though fully God in himself, took on human flesh within a particular human culture, at a specific point in space-time history, so as to bring the gospel to us in a way that we can understand. Without the incarnation there would have been no gospel. In the same way the gospel must be incarnated in every culture and historical context to which God sends us. As Andrew Walls has argued, all of us want the church to be “a place to feel at home.” The implication of the incarnation is, “Whenever He (Christ) is taken by men in any time and place He takes that nationality, that society, that ‘culture,’ and sanctifies all that is capable of sanctification by His presence.”<sup>13</sup> He calls this the indigenizing principle.

---

<sup>11</sup> E.g., Sider, *One-Sided Christianity?* esp. pp. 49-77.

<sup>12</sup> Para. 5 on “Christian Social Responsibility” in the Lausanne Covenant, International Congress on World Evangelization, Lausanne, Switzerland, July 1974.

<sup>13</sup> Andrew F. Walls, “The Gospel as the Prisoner and Liberator of Culture,” *Missionalia* 10:3 (1982), pp. 93-105 (97-98).

This is what makes the gospel communicable and also much more easily acceptable!

In other words, unless the gospel is incarnated into a particular culture, it will never effectively penetrate the people of that culture. But the principle goes even further than that. It is when a person becomes a Christian without losing touch with his or her own culture that the individual is thereby in turn empowered to proclaim the gospel in a manner that speaks with power to one's own culture and people. Thus taking culture seriously is indispensable to effective mission.<sup>14</sup>

This of course does not mean that the Christian accepts and baptizes everything within the culture of those to whom he or she brings the gospel. There will be some things that will need to be rejected outright, especially if they are clearly idolatrous and immoral. Others will need to be redeemed and transformed by the gospel. This brings us to the pilgrim principle, of which Andrews Walls also speaks. It reminds the Christian that "he has no abiding city and warns him that to be faithful to Christ will put him out of step with his society; for that society never existed, in East or West, ancient time or modern, which could absorb the word of Christ painlessly into its system."<sup>15</sup> Thus the Christian message, which must be intentionally incarnational, should also at the same time be counter-cultural when necessary. Taking culture seriously in theologizing requires us to hold both principles in proper tension always. Any truly missiological theology must do the same.

Having outlined the three criteria for a missiological theology, I would like now to look at the missiological implications of Cho's theology. I will begin with the evangelistic and pastoral dimensions of his theology.

### 3. The Evangelistic and Pastoral Dimension

Cho's theology is clearly very strong in this area. The fact that he is the pastor of one of the largest churches in world should itself be adequate proof of this. However for the purpose of drawing out clearly the implications of his theology, I will look in turn at his emphasis on evangelism and church growth, his pastoral methods and the emphasis on "signs and wonders."

---

<sup>14</sup> I have argued this at length in Hwa Yung, *Kingdom Identity and Christian Mission* (Singapore: Discipleship Training Centre, 2000).

<sup>15</sup> Walls, "The Gospel as the Prisoner and Liberator of Culture," p. 99.

### 3.1 Evangelism and Church Growth

Evangelism and church growth is fundamental to Cho's understanding of mission. In a paper titled "The Secret behind the World's Biggest Church," he states that his "ultimate purpose...is winning souls" and that his prayer is "that churches all around the world may grow so that they can glorify God through their ministries."<sup>16</sup> Much of his thinking on this subject is enunciated in his book, *More Than Numbers*, wherein he "shares the secret of church growth."<sup>17</sup> In this he distinctly differs from those, like the Minjung theologians, who espouse a radical political version of Christianity which denies a proper place to evangelism and church growth in the mission of the church.

This commitment to evangelism and church growth is not only seen in his teachings but also in the ministry and programs of the YFGC. Before starting the current church he had pioneered at least two other large churches. His present church has also planted many other churches in Korea and elsewhere. For the purpose of disseminating principles of church growth throughout the world, Church Growth International was set up in 1976.<sup>18</sup> Furthermore, the latest count shows the church supporting 579 cross-cultural missionaries working in churches spread over 57 countries throughout the world.<sup>19</sup>

There are some key elements in his church-planting method. To begin with, prayer is central. His response to the question, "How have we maintained such unusual growth in our local church?" is "The real answer is prayer."<sup>20</sup> This includes private prayer, regular and extended group sessions at the YFGC, such as the Friday night prayer meetings, and also fasting. As well as that, members and groups are encouraged to spend extended time at the prayer mountain near the North Korean

---

<sup>16</sup> "The Secret behind the World's Biggest Church," in *Azusa Street and Beyond: Pentecostal Missions and Church Growth in the Twentieth Century*, ed. L. Grant McClung (South Plainfield, NJ: Bridge Publishing, 1986), pp. 99-104 (104).

<sup>17</sup> *More than Numbers* (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1984).

<sup>18</sup> Cho and Harold Hostetler, *Successful Home Cell Groups* (Seoul: Seoul Logos, 1981/1997), pp. 97-105.

<sup>19</sup> As stated in the video clip, "Through Hardship to Glory—Yoido Full Gospel Church, Sr. Pastor Dr. David Yonggi Cho," distributed in September 2002.

<sup>20</sup> *More than Numbers*, p. 99.

border.<sup>21</sup> The second is his emphasis on the power of Holy Spirit in working signs and wonders. More will be said about this below. The third is the extensive use of home cell groups for evangelism and pastoral nurture. He writes: “Do you think it is important to save souls? If the answer to that question is yes, then the cell system is for you.”<sup>22</sup> The fourth is his strong emphasis on developing lay-leadership.<sup>23</sup>

But Cho is also concerned that his ideas do not degenerate into a mere set of techniques for church growth. “Church growth is more than a series of ideas and principles which will, when put into practice, automatically make your church grow numerically.”<sup>24</sup> One needs to grasp the underlying theology and philosophy, and not just the surface principles and practices. In particular, church growth has a lot to do with the heart of the leader because that is where it all begins. This is clearly a corrective to what has been called by some as “managerial missiology,” which perceives church growth primarily in terms of the result of applying certain techniques properly.

### 3.2 Pastoral Structures for Growth and Nurture: Cell-Groups and Lay Training

For a church to grow, evangelism in itself is not enough. Proper and effective structures must be emplaced to nurture new converts. As already noted, the heart of Cho’s method here is the use of cell groups.<sup>25</sup> These are crucial to evangelism because that is where non-Christians can be brought into the life of the church through the non-threatening setting of home or work-place. It is where the discipling process takes place through the personal ministry of praying for one another and the study of

---

<sup>21</sup> *More than Numbers*, pp. 99-108; cf. also Philip D. Douglass, “Yonggi Cho and the Korean Pentecostal Movement: Some Theological Reflections,” *Presbyterian* 17:1 (1991), pp. 16-34 (20).

<sup>22</sup> *More than Numbers*, p. 46.

<sup>23</sup> Cho with John W. Hurston, “Ministry through Home Cell Units,” in *Korean Church Growth Explosion*, eds. Bong Rin Ro and Martin L. Nelson (Seoul: Word of Life Press; Taichung: ATA, 1983), pp. 270-89; *More than Numbers*, pp. 31-38; “The Secret behind the World’s Biggest Church,” p. 103.

<sup>24</sup> *More than Numbers*, p. 11.

<sup>25</sup> For details see Cho & Hostetler, *Successful Home Cell Groups*; Cho & Hurston, “Ministry through Home Cell Units”; *More than Numbers*, pp. 39-54.

the Bible.<sup>26</sup> It is also the place for developing of Christian community in the midst of the increasing anonymity of modern life.<sup>27</sup> To enable the groups to gel quickly and effectively, Cho prefers homogenous groups with people coming from similar backgrounds to heterogeneous ones.<sup>28</sup>

The YFGC is made up of tens of thousands of cell groups. Obviously for that to be possible the laity must be entrusted with leadership. Thus each group is led by a trained lay person who is in turn supervised by a more senior leader. Women are also included in leadership in spite of the inherited conservatism of traditional Korean culture where leadership has always been in the hands of men.<sup>29</sup> By giving serious attention to the development and use of lay leadership, he shows the seriousness with which he takes the New Testament understanding of “body life” in the church, and turns it into an effective program of pastoral oversight.

Here again Cho's theology is soundly missiological. Twentieth century ecclesiological discussion has drawn repeated attention to “God's frozen people,” referring to the laity who has been denied a meaningful role in the mission and ministry of the church. This has been one of the key reasons why many traditional churches have not grown. Cho's approach not only takes the priesthood of all believers seriously, and thereby releases an abundance of energy for effective ministry. It also provides the only practical manner in which large churches can be pastured effectively with the needs of individuals met in the context of a caring community of believers. Further, Cho admits that one of the key motivations behind his use of cell groups is the Communist threat.<sup>30</sup> In the event of a repeat of the Korean War, pastors can be removed and church buildings destroyed. But as the experience of the house churches in neighboring China testifies to so eloquently, the church can remain vital through the cell groups.

---

<sup>26</sup> Out of the one hour for the meeting, 45 minutes is set aside for Bible study and praying for individual needs. See for example, *The Homecell Group Study Guide*, vol. 1 (Seoul: Seoul Logos, 1990/1997).

<sup>27</sup> Cho & Hostetler, *Successful Home Cell Groups*, pp. 49-56; *More than Numbers*, p. 49.

<sup>28</sup> *More than Numbers*, pp. 42-45.

<sup>29</sup> *More than Numbers*, pp. 43-44; Cho & Hostetler, *Successful Home Cell Groups*, pp. 23-29.

<sup>30</sup> *More than Numbers*, pp. 40-41.

Perhaps it would be appropriate to add a peculiarly Methodist observation at this point. In the eighteenth century revival in England, the two great leaders were John Wesley and George Whitefield. All contemporary records indicated that, of the two, Whitefield was the more powerful evangelist. But strange as it seems, it is Wesley's work that have survived and thrived through the years in the worldwide Methodist movement, whereas the Calvinistic Methodist Church linked with Whitefield is today a small denomination restricted largely to Britain. Yet the reason is not hard to find. It lies in the genius of Wesley's pastoral structures. All his converts were channeled into "classes" of about ten to twelve each. Here each member was nurtured to maturity and usefulness in ministry. More mature ones were channeled into "bands" where standards were even more demanding. And out of the class and band leaders came the lay preachers of early Methodism who went on to become the leaders of the next generation. From these emerged the worldwide Methodist movement. The unfortunate thing was that about a hundred years after the revival first began, Methodists in both Britain and in America began losing interest in the class and band meetings. This was one key reason for the loss of spiritual vitality in Methodism. This observation clearly points to Cho's wisdom in making cell groups an essential part of the pastoral structures in his church.<sup>31</sup>

### 3.3 The Place of Signs and Wonders

We now turn to Cho's emphasis on divine healing through prayer which he links inseparably with church growth. To him, the lack of emphasis given to the miraculous is often a cover up for the powerlessness of the church. This is grievous to the Spirit. "Signs, wonders and the power of the Holy Spirit are essential for successful preaching of the gospel."<sup>32</sup> In his ministry he repeatedly finds that people turn to faith in the Christ when healing takes place.

---

<sup>31</sup> For an introduction to this aspect of Methodism, see Snyder, Howard A. Snyder, *The Radical Wesley and Patterns of Church Renewal* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1980). It should be noted that it is not certain that Cho's cells approach the level of rigor, commitment and mutual accountability required in Wesley's classes and bands.

<sup>32</sup> *Salvation, Health and Prosperity: Our Threefold Blessings in Christ* (Altamonte Springs, FL: Creation House, 1987), p. 143; cf. also *More than Numbers*, p. 87. It should be noted however that there is relatively little discussion on deliverance ministry of the demonized in Cho's writings. It would be surprising if this is not common phenomenon within Korean Pentecostalism.

For Cho, healing is closely linked to the cross. In line with Pentecostal atonement teaching, Christ's death not only brought us spiritual salvation but also physical healing.<sup>33</sup> At the same time, unlike some Pentecostal and charismatic teachers who insist that all can be healed provided the necessary conditions are met, he is careful to point out that sometimes it may not be God's will to heal.<sup>34</sup>

Here again, Cho's teaching and practice is consistent with what is clearly seen in the growth of the church throughout the world today. Wherever the church is growing rapidly, be it among Pentecostals in Latin American, African Independent Churches in Africa, or house churches in China, invariably we see the manifestation of signs and wonders through the work of the Holy Spirit. It is therefore evident that this emphasis, together with his teaching on evangelism, cell groups and lay leadership all contribute significantly to the growth of the church. In other words, measured by its evangelistic impact and pastoral efficacy, Cho's theology cannot be faulted. In this area, his ideas and practices carry profound missiological implications for the global church.

#### 4. The Social Transformation Dimension

We come now to the second criterion for a missiological theology, which is the extent to which it empowers the church to address the social problems and political challenges in its context. We will look at this aspect of Cho's theology under three sub-headings: the social outreach programs of the Yoido Church, the sociological dynamics of Pentecostalism, and Cho's teaching on the 'treble blessings.'

##### 4.1 The Social Outreach Programs of Yoido Church

The YFGC has a very strong social welfare ministry. It includes caring for the elderly, vocational training for underprivileged, financing hundreds of open-heart surgeries for children, outreach to youth and

---

<sup>33</sup> *Salvation, Health and Prosperity*, p. 121, *The Homecell Group Study Guide*, vol. 1, pp. 225-28; *How Can I Be Healed?* (Seoul: Seoul Logos, 1999), pp. 35-37, 62-63.

<sup>34</sup> *Fourth Dimension*, 3rd ed. (Seoul: Seoul Logos, 1996), pp. 108-13; *How Can I Be Healed?* pp. 135-140.

various other forms of welfare ministry.<sup>35</sup> Two particularly impressive social outreach programs are the Elim Welfare Town and the Good People World Family. The former provides vocational and spiritual training for unemployed youth, housing for senior citizens, and care for socially depressed neighborhoods. The latter is concerned with global social outreach to developing countries.

At the same time, however, Cho has not been noted for his advocacy of active sociopolitical participation. For example, during the difficult years of military dictatorship in the sixties through to the early eighties in South Korea, he kept away from all anti-government protests. One observer, Sung-Hoon Myung, however, comments that since 1987 the leadership of Cho's church has begun to pay increasing attention to sociopolitical needs and challenges of Korea.<sup>36</sup> One significant initiative in this direction is the *Kukmin Daily* which represents a serious attempt to influence Korean society through a national newspaper. In sum, Cho's theology is clearly much stronger on social concerns than on sociopolitical involvement.

#### 4.2 The Sociological Dynamics of Pentecostalism

To some observers, the above analysis of Cho appears to confirm the common perception of Pentecostalism as "the haven of the masses," as a socially escapist religion in the midst of injustice and oppression. However, some recent studies have indicated that such a characterization of Pentecostalism is too simplistic and in need of revision. For example, Donald Dayton, on the basis of an analysis of the Pentecostal history in the North American context, has suggested that one can make a strong case for the power of Pentecostal and charismatic experience as a form of empowering and conscientization that both sustains in the face of oppression and enables resistance and movement toward change—and affects inner transformation that may have long range social significance.<sup>37</sup>

---

<sup>35</sup> Daniel J. Adams, "The Life and Ministry of Cho Yonggi: A Theological Inquiry," *Chinese Theological Journal* 3:1 (1988), pp. 31-57 (38-39).

<sup>36</sup> Sung-Hoon Myung, "Spiritual Dimensions of Church Growth as Applied in the Yoido Full Gospel Church" (Ph.D. Dissertation, Fuller Theological Seminary, Pasadena, CA, 1990), pp. 258-60.

<sup>37</sup> Donald W. Dayton, "Pentecostal/Charismatic Renewal and Social Change: A Western Perspective," *Transformation* 5:4 (1988), pp. 7-13 (13).

Dayton's study has found support from a number of other scholars. In a recent study on Latin American Pentecostalism, the sociologist, David Martin, has suggested that the evidence shows clearly that Pentecostalism, though existing at the margins of society, can through its inner spiritual dynamics bring about social transformation within that society. He argues that "poor and marginal people could initiate a revision of consciousness amounting to a cultural revolution."<sup>38</sup> Pentecostals may be morally conservative, "but sociologically, they are one of the forward factors of radical social change."<sup>39</sup> In sum, Pentecostalism contains within itself powerful elements for the conscientization of the poor and oppressed.

Radical Minjung theologians can rightly claim that they have been in the forefront of advocacy for social transformation, especially during the difficult years of military dictatorship, when theological conservatives have generally ignored the wider sociopolitical issues. But this claim must be balanced by another perspective on South Korean realities. This is found, for example, in Seyoon Kim's comment on Minjung theology *vis-a-vis* Cho's Pentecostalism. He pointedly asks:

If it is in fact the case that some of the minjung draw consolation, encouragement, and strength from the charismatic fellowship of the Choongang Assembly of God Church...and in some cases manage to escape from sickness and poverty and to climb up the social ladder with the help of the ministry of the church, what right does...any...minjung theologian have to tell them that they are mistaken or duped and stand in need of the proper guidance of the minjung theologians? And if others of the minjung find that their faith in Jesus Christ as presented in the classic confessions of the Christian church gives them strength to escape the poverty and oppression—as often happens—what right does a minjung theologian have to tell them that they have been duped by a theology of the ruling class and must be taught the doctrine of self-redemption through socio-political struggle?<sup>40</sup>

In light of this, our perception of the sociopolitical significance of Cho's theology would need careful reappraisal. It would be correct to say

---

<sup>38</sup> David Martin, *Forbidden Revolutions: Pentecostalism in Latin America, Catholicism in Eastern Europe* (London: SPCK, 1996), p. 66.

<sup>39</sup> Martin, *Forbidden Revolutions*, p. 60.

<sup>40</sup> Seyoon Kim, "Is 'Minjung Theology' a Christian Theology?" *Calvin Theological Journal* 22:2 (1987), pp. 251-74 (262-63); the Yoido Church used to be called the Choongang Assembly of God.

that Cho needs to develop in his theology a deeper grasp of the sociopolitical implications of the gospel. In this he shares the same weakness of much of Evangelical and Pentecostal thinking of the twentieth century. At the same time, it could well be that over the long-term, his Pentecostalism may have a far stronger impact on social transformation in Korea than Minjung theology. For, apart from the evidences adduced from studies on Pentecostalism above, there are other evidences and arguments which convincingly show that evangelism and pastoral nurture of Christian converts into strong counter-cultural communities are not antithetical, but complementary, to more pro-active approaches to the process of social change.<sup>41</sup>

#### 4.3 The Treble Blessings Teaching

But before leaving this section we need to look at one more aspect of Cho's teaching, the "treble blessings" that we have in Christ. For Cho, the Christian message is one of hope. He defines this hope in terms of 3 John 2, translated in English as, "I wish above all things that thou mayest prosper and be in health, even as thy soul prospereth."<sup>42</sup> He interprets this to mean that salvation is holistic: it includes the salvation of the soul, the healing of the body and material blessings from God—a "triple salvation." We have already looked at the first two blessings and have suggested that his teachings on these are fully consistent with the Bible. But it is that third aspect of this that have given rise to problems for others because it seems to be no more than a Korean version of the American gospel of prosperity or "health and wealth gospel" preached by those belonging to the Faith movement within North American Pentecostalism.<sup>43</sup>

What does Cho actually teach on material blessings? It would be best to let him speak for himself. He argues that the Bible teaches that

---

<sup>41</sup> Stephen C. Mott, *Biblical Ethics and Social Change* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982), pp. 107-208 argues that the "paths to justice" include evangelism, the church living as counter-cultural community, strategic non-cooperation and political action.

<sup>42</sup> "The Secret behind the World's Biggest Church," pp. 102-103; *Salvation, Health and Prosperity*, pp. 11-12. The scripture quotation here is from KJV.

<sup>43</sup> Cf. B. Barron, "Faith Movement (Word Movement)," *Dictionary of Christianity in America*, eds. Daniel G. Reid, et al. (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1990), pp. 426-27.

God intends it that we through Christ's "poverty might be rich" (2 Cor 8:9). He further states that,

If we do not receive the "riches" as stated in scripture, we make the poverty of Jesus of no effect. We have an important responsibility: to receive the prosperous life...which He make possible for us by living in poverty. If we live a life of poverty without a special reason, as described earlier, we are insulting Jesus. Here the legitimate reasons could be that we volunteer to become poor by giving all we have to the work of God, or that under a great persecution we become poor to give glory to God. Other than these reasons, if we do not enjoy the prosperity provided for us by Jesus Christ, but we live in poverty, we bring shame to the name of Christ who became poor so that we might become rich.... Make up your mind that you will do your best to prosper, and God will help you. This is the way to glorify Christ scripturally.<sup>44</sup>

Is this then another version of the American prosperity gospel? To answer this, we need to note the following.

First, the historical context of the genesis of Cho's teaching is of crucial importance in understanding his teaching. Unlike middle-class Americans pursuing the "American dream," the people among whom Cho was ministering in the Korea of 1950s were trying to scrap out a living amidst the chaos of the aftermath of the Korean War. Cho's struggle was that he appeared to be preaching merely a God of future salvation in heaven while his congregation lived in destitution and grinding poverty in the present! And in his despair he prayed: "Where is the God of the present? With what can I give hope and new life to these people who are in despair, starved and poorly clothed?"<sup>45</sup> It was out of this struggle that his teaching emerged. Cho has insisted that his is a contextual theology arising out of widespread poverty and gross human need.<sup>46</sup>

Further, elsewhere he has tried to clarify his teaching on the issue. In an interview with the magazine, *Charisma & Christian Life*, in 1988 he argues that American Charismatics tend to equate prosperity with money, which is undoubtedly problematic. They therefore need to redefine their understanding. He argues that,

---

<sup>44</sup> *Salvation, Health and Prosperity*, p. 68.

<sup>45</sup> *Salvation, Health and Prosperity*, p. 11.

<sup>46</sup> In small group discussion on 27 Aug 2002, Seoul, at which the author was present.

...in the Orient we have a different idea. Prosperity means successfully fulfilling the goal.... One must not connect prosperity with financial success, because in many cases, having prosperity means losing all. For example, in order to have a prosperous church, I gave up my time, my home, my salary—everything...yet I prospered tremendously in church growth.<sup>47</sup>

Prosperity is equated with success in fulfilling the goal that God sets before us in whatever sphere of life—whether spiritual, material, academic, social, political, and so forth—and whereby God is glorified. His teaching on material blessing must therefore be understood within this wider definition of prosperity with which he works.

Thirdly, in so far as his teaching touches on material blessings, even there he lays down some very clear safeguards. He insists that our motivation must be right, and that it is God that we seek and not “money, fame and prestige.” As a corollary of putting God first, tithing must be practiced.<sup>48</sup> Elsewhere he also argues that those who have received the threefold blessings of Christ should live in true Christian freedom, in particular, freedom from covetousness.<sup>49</sup> Finally, given the changed circumstances of South Korea today from that of the 1950s and 60s, he has suggested that we should now place greater emphasis on sacrifice than blessing.<sup>50</sup>

What then are we to make of his teaching on “treble blessings”? Given the above clarifications, it would be unfair to accuse Cho of teaching a Korean version of the American gospel of prosperity. Indeed he has suggested that his own teaching is a “gospel of need,” in contrast to the gospel of prosperity which is a “gospel of greed.”<sup>51</sup> However, Cho may have unwisely opened himself to that accusation by basing his teaching on 3 John 2, which is the same verse that American prosperity gospel teachers use. Quite apart from the questionable exegesis of the verse used by these teachers, it may be wiser if Cho builds his argument on other clear teachings in the Bible on God’s desire to bless his people.

---

<sup>47</sup> Stephen Strang, “Cho’s Problems with Prosperity,” *Charisma & Christian Life* (March, 1988), pp. 69-71 (69). Cf. also his definition of success in *Salvation, Health and Prosperity*, pp. 97-98.

<sup>48</sup> *Solving Life’s Problems* (Seoul: Seoul Logos, 1980), pp. 30-41.

<sup>49</sup> *Salvation, Health and Prosperity*, pp. 158-59.

<sup>50</sup> In small group discussion; see footnote 46.

<sup>51</sup> In small group discussion; see footnote 46.

He would then be able to place his teaching on a sounder exegetical basis with the necessary refinements, and at the same time without allowing it to be associated with a wrong teaching that he rejects. Perhaps Myung, a Korean scholar who has carefully examined Cho's theology, sums up the matter well. He suggests that there is a danger that Cho's theology is not as strong on sanctification as it could, and that a much stronger emphasis on sacrifice and self-denial is necessary if it is to avoid ending up as "another typical health and wealth gospel contributing to self-centered dreams."<sup>52</sup>

Yet having stated all these, we must return to our fundamental question: What are the missiological implications of Cho's teaching on material blessings? I believe that it is far more important than it has been previously thought to be. Evangelicals in the main have rightly rejected the American gospel of prosperity as sub-Christian. But not many have developed a robust and sound biblical doctrine of God's desire to bless in its place. After all, the Bible is replete with God's promises on this, from the Old Testament teaching on shalom to the New Testament's "Seek first his Kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things shall be given to you as well" (Mat 6:33, NIV). And if the God of the Christian faith cannot be called upon to "Give us this day our daily bread" then surely he does not deserve our worship and adoration at all.

If this is right, then the missiological implications are immense. As we have argued, the gospel is not merely about spiritual salvation when we die. It is also about how the coming of the kingdom of God and the lordship of Christ over all of life. One of the most pressing needs facing us is that of hunger and poverty in the world today. Economic globalization has further aggravated these problems. This is true in much of Asia and Africa today. Further, missiologists have often noted that there is still today a large overlap between the areas of the world where people are poor materially and where the gospel has not yet been preached. And even in Africa where large parts have become at least nominally Christian, poverty still reigns. For example, the latest UNCTAD report shows that of the twenty-four poorest countries in Africa, almost nine out of ten people live on less than \$2 per day (on a purchasing power parity basis) and two-thirds survive on less than \$1 per day.<sup>53</sup> Within the context of such widespread poverty, what gospel or good news does the church have for the suffering world? Many economists have given up on Africa as a basket case. But the Christian

---

<sup>52</sup> Myung, "Spiritual Dimensions of Church Growth," p. 258.

<sup>53</sup> "Poverty in Africa," *The Economist* (July 13, 2002), p. 90.

missionary, armed with the gospel and the good news of God's intention to bless, does not need to follow suit! For the gospel remains "the power of God unto salvation to all who believe" (Rom 1:16), even in the material and economic realm.

But to facilitate this process and to make the gospel of God's blessing one that is truly liberating for those living in the bondage of poverty, there is a real urgency to restate it more carefully to prevent it from leading us into false teaching. Part of this task includes making a serious effort at bringing together all the relevant elements—personal conversion, revival in churches and nations, God's desire to bless, moral and cultural values and economic growth, and other related ideas—into an integrated understanding of the relationship between the gospel and sociopolitical transformation. I believe that this constitutes a fundamental missiological and theological challenge to all of us. Properly carried out, this will help the church to release the saving power of the gospel of Christ to bring about a powerful transformation in many situations of extreme poverty in the world today.<sup>54</sup>

In summary, as we have already noted, in line with much of twentieth century Evangelical theology, Cho's theology needs to develop a stronger grasp of the sociopolitical dimension of the gospel of Christ. At the same time, aspects of his theology have some very important missiological implications with respect to the gospel's power to effect social change.

### 5. The Cultural Dimension

We come now to the third criterion for a missiological theology, that of whether it takes culture seriously. Cho's writings do not say a lot in this area, but enough for us to see that he does take it with real seriousness.

---

<sup>54</sup> I am not suggesting any simplistic approach to developmental economics here. The Korean church was able to build on Korean cultural values which in many ways helped to bring about the economic miracle that Korea experienced. I am simply saying that there is also a very important place for the spiritual dimension to be taken seriously, not least in its ability to bring about the inculcation of values like hard work, discipline, thrift, supportive family ties, and so forth, all of which contribute towards the "social lift" often observed in periods of revivals in church history. For this task to be done effectively, it will require a most serious effort in Christian social ethical rethinking.

First, he consciously seeks to develop Christian traditions which would help Korean converts to remain rooted to their own indigenous culture. In his book, *More Than Numbers*, he writes:

We evangelical Korean Christians have developed our own traditions. This is very important because it makes it possible for us to be Christian without being less Korean. In the past, missionaries not only brought their religion but also their culture to the countries they evangelized. So it became apparent that the new converts lost much of their natural heritage. I believe that this produced an unnecessary hindrance to the acceptance of the gospel of Jesus Christ, which is for all people.<sup>55</sup>

One cannot get a more explicit statement than that for the purpose of affirming the importance of culture in the development of our Christian teachings and practices.

Secondly, we have earlier noted the same emphasis in his teaching on prosperity. He insists on a distinctively oriental understanding of this, which he argues is different from the western or American.

Thirdly, we see this also in his emphasis on healing which is such an important component of his teaching. Western Evangelical theology in the last century had little place for healing, except within some Pentecostal and later charismatic circles. The influence of the Enlightenment and the development of modern science prevented many Christians from taking the miraculous seriously. However, it is not just forms of western Pentecostalism and charismatic Christianity that have reemphasized the place of healing in the life of the church. Indigenous churches in the non-western world have always taken it seriously. This is true of the African Independent Churches, the house churches in China, Asian Christian leaders like John Sung of China or Petrus Octavianus of the Indonesian revival, and so forth. Thus the strong emphasis on healing cannot be attributed merely to the Pentecostal tradition from which Cho comes. It is also a direct response on his part to the felt needs of the Korean people who needs to see the reality and power of God.

One interesting point relates to the criticism by some that Cho is guilty of "shamanizing" Christianity. This accusation focuses especially on his healing and exorcism ministries.<sup>56</sup> I believe the criticism is misplaced. It appears that the proper understanding of Cho on this is to

---

<sup>55</sup> *More than Numbers*, p. 9.

<sup>56</sup> E.g., Boo-woong Yoo, "Response to Korean Shamanism by the Pentecostal Church," *International Review of Mission* 75/297 (1986), pp. 70-74.

see it as illustrative of his efforts to contextualizes the gospel in order to address the felt needs of a people. As Cho sees it, he is consciously seeking “to show the miraculous power of God *to those who still believed in shamanism*.”<sup>57</sup> One of critics states, “The only difference is that a shaman performs his wonders in the name of spirits while Rev. Cho exorcises evil spirits and heals in the name of Jesus.”<sup>58</sup> But this only goes to reinforces Cho’s defense of his own view, which is that the power that he exercises is not shamanistic power but that of the Holy Spirit. But more than that is the fact that what Cho does is to provide what missiologists call a “functional substitute” in the context of Korean culture, which demonstrate his seriousness in contextualizing the gospel!

Fourthly, this does not mean that Cho follows Korean culture slavishly. Where the need arises, he is prepared to be counter-cultural as well. This is seen in his acceptance of women leadership in the church. He recognizes clearly that Korean culture “decisively puts women in a subordinate role throughout society.”<sup>59</sup> Yet when convinced of the theological rightness and practical wisdom of the decision, he was prepared to risk misunderstanding from his fellow male leaders in the church to seek their agreement to implement it.

All these do not prove that Cho’s work has always been carried out in the most culturally sensitive manner. It may be that his church, like much of the Asian church, needs to be much more intentional about indigenizing the gospel in Asian soil. But it does points clearly to the fact that he takes culture seriously, and that in so far as it is possible he does not wish to give any cultural offense that may hinder the mission of Christ in the world today. And that is something that all involved in mission should affirm.

## 6. Conclusion

In the above we have attempted to look at aspects of Cho’s theology from a missiological perspective, and note that there are some very important lessons that we can learn if we are serious about the work of Christian mission in the world today. This is particular true of his concern for evangelism and cross-cultural missions, the use of cell groups for pastoral nurture, the healing and deliverance ministry, the

---

<sup>57</sup> “The Secret behind the World’s Biggest Church,” p. 100. Italics are mine.

<sup>58</sup> Yoo, “Response to Korean Shamanism,” p. 74.

<sup>59</sup> Cho & Hostetler, *Successful Home Cell Groups*, p. 24.

social concerns of the YFGC in caring for the human welfare, the sociological dynamics of Pentecostalism, his teaching that God is concerned to bless us materially, and his stated concern to take culture seriously so that one can be Christian without losing one's Korean identity.

Given the significance of the various aspects of his thought, the challenge would be for him and his colleagues to refine them further in order to make them truly missiologically empowering for the church. In conclusion, I will restrict myself to one example to illustrate what is meant. Cho's theology of blessing was first formulated in the 1950s when most Koreans were poor and destitute. Given the fact that the socioeconomic situation has changed completely, with Korea soon to join the ranks of the developed nations, the theology of blessing needs much more careful restating today. Otherwise, it will end up essentially encouraging Korean Christians to go after the American dream, or its Korean equivalent, and end up leading covetous and materialistic lives where God is increasingly pushed aside. When that happens—and there are clear signs that it has begun in various parts of the Korean church<sup>60</sup>—it will only lead the church into serious spiritual decline.

---

<sup>60</sup> Cf. Young-gi Hong, "Nominalism in Korean Protestantism," *Transformation* 16:4 (1999), pp. 135-41.