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## A Response to Myung-Soo Park

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## A Response to Myung-Soo Park

Gary L. McIntosh

### *Introduction*

It is an honor to attend the Young San International Church Growth Conference, and to present a brief response to Professor Myung-Soo Park's excellent paper. The Korean Pentecostal movement, especially as represented by Reverend David Yonggi Cho and the Yoido Full Gospel Church, has been a subject of interest to researchers in the Church Growth Movement within the USA for over thirty years. Dr. Park is to be commended for providing a new look at this phenomenal movement, leader, and church. His analysis of the numerous testimonials found in *Shinanggye* magazine provides many insights into the dynamic growth of this historic church and leads to a broader understanding of the Pentecostal movement in Korea.

Allow me to respond in two parts. First, I will comment on the direct connection between Dr. Park's findings and traditional Church Growth principles. Second, I will note some concerns and questions that may be of help in focusing future research on this important issue of spiritual leadership and church growth.

### *Church Growth Connections*

As developed by Donald McGavran, Church Growth Theory involves a strong commitment to getting the facts through scientific research. Not content to trust in anecdotal evidence alone, Church Growth focuses on rigorous research. While the current study looks at personal testimonies, it seeks to eliminate the individual nature of each testimony by analyzing the common themes that arise from numerous testimonies. By studying all of the testimonies found in *Shinanggye*, biases found in individual testimonies are limited. The analysis of testimonials presented

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by Professor Park indicates a direct link between Reverend David Yonggi Cho's approach to ministry and Church Growth Theory and Thought. This linkage is observed in the following examples.

*Trust God for growth.* Church Growth Theory recognizes that biblical growth comes not by human might or by power, but by God's Spirit (Zechariah 4:6). Even though we have a responsibility to plant and water, it is God who causes the growth of His churches (1 Corinthians 3:6). Dr. Park's research demonstrates a strong correlation between trust in God through prayer and the growth of Yoido Full Gospel Church. The practice of spiritual warfare through crying-out prayer, all-night prayer, fasting prayer, and hands-on prayer all illustrate that this church trusts in God for church growth.

*Focus on receptive peoples.* Church Growth Theory recognizes that biblical growth comes from reaching out to people who are receptive to the gospel. As pointed out by Professor Park, the Pentecostal movement is a mass movement that has reached out to those who are seeking answers to the problems of life. The testimonies found in *Shinanggye* point out that the Yoido Full Gospel Church has focused on people that "seek a faith to overcome obstacles to life." Such people are open to the Good News of the gospel and are responsive to the message preached.

*Meet felt needs.* An outgrowth of focusing on receptive people is the Church Growth principle of addressing the felt needs of the masses. Those who register at a Full Gospel church "begin the life of faith in order to solve an impending problem, such as a sickness or a business failure." According to Dr. Park's study, Reverend Cho's sermons are always "detailed and vivid. He desires to provide a detailed, specific answer to these people who are suffering from these problems." Dr. Cho seeks to meet people where they are and take them to where they need to be.

*Cultural relevance.* The cultural and political upheavals in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, the liberation from the Japanese colonization, and the economic hardships following World War II created a cultural mindset that was ripe for Dr. Cho's emphasis on the blessings of "soul, all things [material blessings], and health." While this theological approach is not accepted by all, it was an effective, culturally relevant way for Yoido Full Gospel Church to speak to the masses in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and doubtless drew many to faith in Christ.

*Redemption and lift.* A result of church growth is often a rise in the social standing of the masses. Professor Park points out that the emphasis of Dr. Cho on diligence "has contributed greatly in making Koreans reach the middle class." He notes

“the Pentecostal movement made the poor reach the middle class by living diligently.”

*Passionate spirituality.* Church Growth research has found that churches grow when the members are passionate about their faith. Testimonies from the saints of the Full Gospel church illustrate that “they regard the Christian faith as something that they can touch, feel, and experience.” It is an experiential faith that understands life a spiritual warfare. This approach to the Christian life creates a passionate spiritual life that inspires unbelievers and draws them to church.

*Strong leadership.* One of the key principles of Church Growth Thought is the importance of leadership. This principle is evident in the ministry of Dr. Cho, as Professor Park notes: “Reverend Cho is regarded as a special minister with special gifts of the Holy Spirit...”

#### *Concerns and Questions*

Other direct ties between Church Growth Theory and Dr. Park’s study could be noted. The brief notations above point out just a few of the connections between Church Growth Thought and the implications discovered from the analysis of the testimonies as described by Professor Park. However, a few missing concepts raise concerns that might be appropriate to address in future research.

*Salvation from Sin.* Few comments in the testimonies mention salvation from sin. Since Jesus is “the propitiation for our sins; and not for ours only, but also for those of the whole world” (1 John 2:2), it is strange that few, if any, of the testimonies gave witness to salvation from sin. The stress that the testimonies placed on personal problems (healing, etc.) is appreciated, but the lack of emphasis on forgiveness of sin is worrisome. As Professor Parks mentions, “at the bottom of all problems there lies a spiritual problem.” That spiritual problem is separation from God due to sin (Romans 3:23; 6:23). Yet, little testimony is given of reconciliation to God and forgiveness of sins. Are people coming to Christ for forgiveness of their sins, or are they simply coming to have their immediate needs met? Are people truly being redeemed (Titus 3:5) through the preaching of the gospel?

*Place of Jesus Christ.* The only mention of Jesus Christ is as the power behind prayer. “The power of the name of Jesus is the strongest weapon in spiritual warfare,” writes Professor Park. While the Father and the Holy Spirit are given great emphasis in the testimonies of saints, it appears that very little place is given for Jesus Christ. The lack of testimony about Jesus is troublesome since it is Jesus who is the centerpiece of the gospel

through His death, burial, and resurrection (1 Corinthians 15:3-11). Jesus Christ is the centerpiece of the Christian faith. The Holy Spirit is to glorify Christ (John 16:14) and to empower believers to witness concerning Christ (Acts 1:8). Why then do the testimonies give little place to Jesus and His work in salvation?

*Accountability to Scripture.* The Bible testifies that "all Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness: so that the man of God may be adequate, equipped for every good work" (2 Timothy 3:16). It also states "the word of God is living and active and sharper than any two-edged sword, and piercing as far as the division of soul and spirit, of both joints and marrow, and able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart" (Hebrews 4:12). Given the central nature of the Word of God in the spiritual growth of the believer, it is disconcerting that little testimony was highlighted concerning Bible reading and teaching. Is the importance of Bible reading and teaching being neglected in the discipling of the saints?

*Lasting transformation.* The testimonies give evidence of transformed lives. As noted by Dr. Park, people attest to experiencing a changed lifestyle, for example many stopped smoking, drinking, beating their wives, and started honoring Sunday and tithing. Yet, these testimonies appear to reflect only the immediate experience of each believer. Unfortunately, the changed lives witnessed at the moment of the salvation experience sometimes do not have lasting affect. What evidence is there that the testimonies described in *Shinanggye* are long lasting?

*Changing Motives.* As described by Professor Park, the main motive for registering at the church was to find answers to life's problems. The testimonial evidence shows that saints came to church because of business failures, health problems, boredom from life's routines, some mystic factors, and generally to improve their lot in life. While these motives were evident in people who came to Christ and the church during the second half of the 20th century, is the motive changing as we enter the 21st century? The masses of people coming out of World War II were uneducated, poor, and unhealthy. They naturally were drawn to a faith that promised health, wealth, and power. However, today's generation is much more affluent, educated, and powerful. Are their motives for coming to Christ and the church different that those whose testimonies have been analyzed in this study? Perhaps a follow-up study and comparison of testimonies from last century with those in the first part of this century would prove helpful.

*Summary*

Dr. Park has done the Church Growth Movement a great service in analyzing the testimonies of converts to Christ in the Pentecostal movement, especially Yoido Full Gospel Church, over the last half of the 20th century. His analysis and insights provide a very interesting view into the health and function of this great movement and church. The testimonies give clear evidence that the Pentecost movement and Yoido Full Gospel Church have used Church Growth principles over the last half century. However, this responder has concerns that the testimonies may show a lack of (1) commitment to the teaching of and accountability to the Bible, (2) a lack of emphasis on Jesus Christ as the savior from sin, (3) a lack of lasting transformation in the lives of saints, and (4) a lack of understanding the changing nature of the motives of unbelievers in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

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