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A Response to Chris Sugden

Peter Beyerhaus

The concise lecture on “Mission and Church Growth” by Dr. *Chris Sugden* is an appreciative evaluation of Dr. *Yonggi Cho’s* outstanding leadership in the mission of his *Yoido Full Gospel Church* [YFGC]. At the same time it is a straightforward challenge to him to reconsider the range and depth of his mission in our age of globalization in world evangelization. Dr. Sugden agrees with many Christians all over the world that Paul Yonggi Cho and his community are a testimony to God’s blessing on his biblical ministry that made them instruments to bring about an unprecedented example of church growth in modern times.

In his observant approach the speaker aims at a *double focus*:

One is looking back at the role, which the Korean pastor has played in gathering a fast growing community in a situation initially marked by war and deprivation.

The other one lies ahead. He is asking how the Yoido Full Gospel Church could improve and widen its contribution to the universal church, especially to the indigenous churches in the Two-thirds World. These are generally churches of the poor and suffering, highly in need of fraternal assistance from such fellow communities, which are privileged to benefit from the economic affluence of their countries. The common factor in both historical stages is the ability of the Gospel to bring about a social transformation by the life and witness of congregations with simultaneous growth both in spiritual character and in numbers.

To our speaker, an outstanding representative of the “Social Concern Wing” of the Evangelical Movement¹, the former aspect is the more important one. This becomes obvious—but not only here—in the critical note of his question: “Does the Korean Church believe it is qualified to be a leader in the World Church through its numerical success?” Maybe he has in mind such ver-

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sions of *Donald McGavran's* Church Growth-Movement where the rapid multiplication of newly established churches in Latfricasia is seen to be the one clue for fulfilling the unfinished task of world evangelization². But any church growth advocate would maintain that growth in quantity and growth in spiritual depth are not mutually exclusive. They are two expressions of the same movement by the Holy Spirit³, a gladdening experience that Paul Yonggi Cho would be the first one to testify to.

Yet Chris Sugden is quite right in pointing out that social-economic transformation has been one major attractive force and result in the history of the YFGC, - at least in the early stage. It enhanced also the appeal of Paul Yonggi Cho's evangelistic preaching. The very name "*Full Gospel Church*" adopted for his Pentecostal community anticipates the modern emphasize on a holistic approach made in both evangelical and conciliar missiology. In the self-understanding of the Yoido Church the aspects of redemption, healing and prosperity form an undissolvable trias, in which however—at least theologically—priority is given to the first aspect⁴. This will become evident to everybody who visits the worship of the YFGC and listens to the sermon of one of its numerous preachers.

The presentation of Dr. Sugden can be divided into **four parts**, where sections I, II and IV are about equal in length. The widest space is given to section III, which deals with the Korean Church's actual and desirable contribution to the World Church. This conception gives a forward-looking drive to the paper.

In *part one* Dr. Sugden analyzes the personal experience underlying Dr. Cho's pastoral leadership.

In *part two* he compares it with the example given by other contemporary church leaders.

In *part three* Dr. Sugden asks six penetrating questions concerning the present and future leading role of the Korean Church in World Mission generally, and in his conclusion—*part four*—he comments on the missiological discovery that—contrary to common prejudices—Pentecostals in several Two-thirds-World countries exhibit a "*Social Theology*", —not in theory but in practice.

Let me briefly comment on each of these four sections:

I. Christian leadership is indispensable for fruitful evangelism and church growth. It is marked, as Sugden, too, points out, by the following qualities: an inspiring vision, an existential experience resulting in humility and compassion, a strong personality, a strategic mind, a charisma to motivate and train fellow workers and successors.

Sugden rightly puts his emphasize on Yonggi Cho's experi-

ence of anxiety, suffering and rejection. For this enabled him to sympathize with his deprived compatriots and to kindle new hope in them. Dr. Sugden is right in associating this experience with that of Jesus himself, who, indeed, predicted suffering and rejection also to his followers (Mt. 10:16-26).—But it is an overstatement to call this a “repetition”⁵ of the experience of Jesus. In fact it is theologically illegitimate. For what Jesus in his atoning self-sacrifice suffered for us, including the wrath of the Holy God over the sinfulness of the world (Hebr 9:26.28), can never be repeated and does not need to be (Hebr 10:10.12-14). Here we must clearly distinguish between the exemplary and the *soteriological* nature of Christ’s suffering. Emphasizing the pain of human suffering might lead to a Pelagian change of subjects: Man is regarded there as an innocent victim of the cruelty of others⁶ rather than a sinner who by his guilt has deserved the punishment of God—temporal and eternal. The joyful news of the Gospel is primarily not that we can be relieved from our social suffering in an ethically transformed society. Rather it is that we are relieved from God’s eternal punishment, because on his cross Jesus Christ took upon himself this punishment on our behalf.

This is the deep existential experience, which Korean Christians made in the Great Revival Movement of 1903-07⁷, and which has set its stamp on the vigorous evangelical piety of the Korean Church. It has enabled Korean Christians to become outstanding martyrs⁸, and in this way it has made martyrdom part of the secret of Korea’s phenomenal church growth. It would be tragic if this spiritual tradition were lost under the impact of a materialistically oriented “Theology of Prosperity”—a great temptation in an affluent Korea today!

II. Dr. Sugden’s refers to the **ecclesial and national leadership** given by Archbishop *David Gitari*⁹ to his Kenyan Church in the midst of a society, where justice and truth are damaged by declining standards in political life. This is highly relevant to his topic “Christian Leadership”. He does, however, at this point not draw a parallel to the social-political dimension of Paul Yonggi Cho’s ecclesial leadership, although it would be interesting to investigate by a special study.

Some liberal theologians who seem to be rather biased in their derogative judgment upon conservative evangelical churches in Korea generally have indeed, undertaken such investigations. In their anti-American outlook they accuse Korean Evangelicals of complacency with former authoritarian regimes in Korea, leading to blindness to the social misery of the underprivileged classes.¹⁰

What is true in this presentation is that there was a certain degree of evangelical sympathy with former Korean State Presidents on the basis on their common stance against the danger from communist North Korea, of which Korean Christians and Churches had made horrible experiences. On account of this sympathy churches were granted a degree of liberty, which highly favored their rapid expansion, especially during the 1960ies and 1970ies. Evangelical Churches in general and Pentecostals particularly did make a contribution to the economic and cultural development of the Korean nation, although not—unlike *Minjung theologians*¹¹—by a policy of opposition. Instead, they trusted in the morally transforming effect of spiritual regeneration. They built their social strategy on the evangelistic effort to convert influential members in all segments of national life. With his specific emphasize on the power of the Holy Spirit, Dr. Yonggi Cho and his YFGC were part and parcel of this evangelistic strategy.

III. The main concern voiced in Dr. Sugden's lecture pertains to the **contribution** which Paul Yonggi Cho and his community is rendering or should render **to the Mission of the World Church**. He asks a number of questions which finally could be answered only by Dr. Cho himself. As it appears to me, the speaker himself suggests that the model of the Korean Church's participation in the life and ministry of the churches in the Two-thirds-World is to be "part of the suffering church because of its [own] recent experiences of suffering and trial and the Korean cultural theme of "grudge" (in Korean: "*han*"). Here, however, I see a *twofold problem*:

1. One is pointed out by Dr. Sugden himself: "The current generation of young people in Korea have not known the struggles that shaped Dr. Cho." But it is from this younger generation from which almost all of the 10.000 missionaries are going out to the 161 countries where Korean Christians are at work now.¹² Their own outlook is much more conditioned—for better or worse—by the affluence in consequence of the Korean economic post-war miracle. The main problem of Korean Christianity nowadays is not so much the trials of persecution and poverty through which the elder generation has passed, but rather the decline of spiritual zeal on account of the secularization of minds and lifestyle. To the outsider, the fervor exhibited in early morning prayer, church attendance and the sacrificial mood shown in church collections are still remarkable. But on the whole, the majority of churches complain about a decreasing interest in evangelism, which has led to the saddening effect, that—with some noteworthy exceptions—the stupendous numerical growth of

former decades has come to a standstill. This experience is even made by so famous mega-churches as the *Presbyterian Young Nak Church* and also by the *Yoido Full Gospel Church* itself¹³.

This indicates that Korean church leaders should pause for a time of critical self-examination, before the possible role of Korean leadership in the World Church can be defined convincingly. In the case of the Pentecostal Church on Yoido-Island, the question might be asked whether its traditional stress on the social-economic aspects of a "holistic mission" that had such an appeal in the miserable post-war situation is still equally relevant in the present situation. The worst of the social problems of former generations have been basically coped with by the public economic welfare.

2. I do not believe either that the exploration of the concept of "*han*", which was introduced by the Feminist theologian *Chung, Hyun-Kyung* in her syncretistic address to the WCC's at Canberra Assembly in 1991¹⁴ will be taken up by Korean Evangelical and Pentecostal missiologists in their attempt to develop a contextual biblical theology. "Grudge, wrath and bitterness" are not the characteristics of the public mentality in Korea today, if my observation is correct. It is far more optimistic, but dangerously *hedonistic* at the same time.

What, however, seems to be relevant and necessary in the present situation is an evangelistic power-encounter between the eschatological message of God's judgment and mercy in the sacrificial death of his Son and a self-sufficient second generation church which is in danger more and more to resemble the church at Sardes: "*Wake up, strengthened what remains ... remember what you have received and heard; obey it and repent!*" (Rev. 3:2-3)

By God's grace this could lead to a new revival, an awakening of conscience. The Korean Church has experienced this in earlier times, and it is an indispensable experience for any local church in the world, which obeys her calling to be a living church.

IV. In his final section Dr. Sugden addresses himself to Dr. Cho as leader of a **Pentecostal church**, the specific characteristic is to believe in and to experience the power of the Holy Spirit to bring about change. Here - as throughout his paper - his emphasis lies on the social condition of the poor and deprived that calls for a change. He convincingly refers to historic models on the Philippines and in Latin American. Here Pentecostals, by their focus on evangelism, prayer and deliverance, have been instruments to bring about change on all levels of life: the personal, familiar and communal. He challenges Dr. Cho to encourage such research that most likely will prove that the Pentecostal

faith and practice were led to similar effects amongst the poor in Korea.

Such study would, no doubt, support the contemporary stress on the holistic nature of the Gospel in its biblical fullness which—let us never forget it!—includes suffering for Christ's sake (Acts 14:22). At the same time. It would also show that the core of the Gospel is Christ's concern to restore people suffering under spiritual and physical pain to a loving relationship to their heavenly father. *Holistic mission* is less a matter of strategy than of performing it in the compassionate mind of Jesus. He in his own ministry applied the holistic diagnosis and therapy: preaching the Gospel, exorcizing evil spirits and healing diseases (cf. Mt. 9:35-10:1). But he clearly attributed the priority of his mission to the proclamation of the Kingdom (Mark 2: 38; Lk 4:42-43). Consequently he admonished his followers: "Seek first his [your heavenly Father's] kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well" (Mt 6:33).

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NOTES

1. Chris Sugden: "Evangelicals and Wholistic Evangelism", in: Vinay Samuel and Albrecht Hauser (Eds.): *Proclaiming Christ in Christ's Way*, Studies in Integral Evangelism, Oxford 1989, pp. 29-51.—C. Sugden: "A Presentation of the Concern for Kingdom Ethics", in: Oliver Barclay and C. Sugden (Eds.): *Kingdom and Creation in Social Ethics*. Nottingham 1990, pp. 12-17.—C. Sugden: "Theological Developments since Lausanne" in: *Transformation 7:1* (Jan.- March 1990), pp. 9-12.—C. Sugden: "What is Good about the Good News to the Poor?" In: Vinay Samuel and C. Sugden (Eds.): *A.D. 2000 and Beyond. A Mission Agenda*. Oxford 1991, pp. 56-81. René C. Padilla and C. Sugden (Eds.): *Texts on evangelical social ethics 1974-1983*. Nottingham 1983.

2. W. J. Hollenweger: "Church Growth: A Faulty American Strategy" in: *International Review of Missions*, July 1968. Reprinted in: Donald McGavran (Ed.): *The Conciliar-Evangelical Debate: The Crucial Documents 1964-1976*, William Carey Library, Pasadena 1977, pp. 108-114.—Jordan Bishop, O.P.: "Numerical Growth—An Adequate Criterion of Mission?" *ibid.* pp. 115-120.—Marie-Louise Martin: "Does the World Need Fantastically Growing Churches?" *ibid.* pp. 15-157.

3. Melvin L. Hodges: *A Pentecostal's View on Mission Strategy*, reprinted *ibid.* pp. 142-149.

4. Cf. Allan Anderson's contribution to this Symposium: "David

Yonggi Cho's Pentecostal Theology as Contextual Theology in Korea".

5. "This narrative ... repeats the experience of Jesus in his ministry of death and resurrection ... "

6. In his address to the 7th World Conference on Mission and Evangelism at Melbourne 1980 Raymond Fung declared: "If we look at people as sinners (as distinct from the 'sinned-against'), we may have concern for them, affection or pity, but not compassion, i.e. suffering together with another, fellow-feeling, sympathy. Many of the evangelistic activities of today have little perception of the people as the sinned-against." R. Fung: "Good News to the Poor—a Case for a Missionary Movement". In: *Your Kingdom Come. Report on the World Conference on Mission and Evangelism, Melbourne, Australia 12-25 May 1980.* Commission on World Mission and Evangelism, WCC, Geneva, 1980, pp. 83-92. esp. pp 84-87 "Human Sinned-Againstness".

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9. David Gitari: "Church and Politics in Kenya". *Transformation* 8:3 (July/Sept. 1991), pp. 7-17.

10. Choo, Chai-Yong: "A Brief Sketch of a Korean Christian History from the Minjung Perspective". In: Kim, Yong-Bock (Ed.): *Minjung Theology. People as subjects of history.* Christian Conference of Asia; Singapore, (no year stated), pp. 69-776.

11. In: Jürgen Moltmann (Ed.): *MINJUNG: Theologie des Volkes Gottes in Südkorea, Neukirchen-Vluyn 1984,* pp. 62-77.

12. Kang, Sung-Sam: "Korean Churches Today", in: *Missions and Missionaries* (Bi-monthly magazine, Grand Rapids) Aug./Sept 2002, pp. 5-7.

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14. Chung, Hyun-Kyung: "Komm, Heiliger Geist—erneuere die ganze Schöpfung", in: Walter Müller-Römheld (Ed.): *Im Zeichen des Heiligen Geistes. Offizieller Bericht der Siebenten Vollversammlung des Ökumenischen Rates der Kirchen, 7-20. Februar 1991 in Canberra/Australien,* Verlag Lembeck, Frankfurt a.M. 1991, pp. 47-56.