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THE PNEUMATOLOGY OF PAUL YONGGI CHO¹

Simon K.H. Chan

Going through the many writings of Yonggi Cho, one is left without a doubt that the doctrine of the Holy Spirit plays a very vital role in his understanding of the Christian life and mission. Cho refers repeatedly to the Holy Spirit throughout his writings.² But his theology of the Spirit (in the sense of reflecting on the Spirit and expressing these reflections in a coherent framework) is largely implicit rather than explicit. My aim in this paper is to highlight some broad features of his teachings concerning the Holy Spirit, make explicit certain pneumatological motifs and offer a critique.

I. A Classical Pentecostal Pneumatology

Cho's teaching on the Holy Spirit adheres very closely to the classical Pentecostal position. He believes in speaking in tongues as the "initial evidence" of baptism in the Holy Spirit and that it is an experience distinct from the new birth.³ He sees the Christian life as progressing towards a deeper faith as one is filled with the Holy Spirit. Through the Spirit one receives "revelational knowledge" in contrast to "sense knowledge." Through earnest prayer one receives the gifts of the Spirit, but one needs also to have constant filling with the Spirit in order to mature in faith.⁴ For Cho, this traditional Pentecostal understanding is

¹ An earlier version of the paper was presented at the Second Youngsan International Theological Symposium, Hansei University, Goonpo, Korea in May 2003.

² For a book that brings all these teachings together see *The Holy Spirit, My Senior Partner* (Altamonte Springs: Creation House, 1989).

³ *The Holy Spirit, My Senior Partner*, pp. 97-117.

⁴ *Born to Be Blessed* (Seoul: Seoul Logos, 1993), pp. 12-14.

not just a “tenet of faith” but a reality that he takes seriously. It is translated into an on-going practice, what he calls revival 365 days a year.⁵ It finds expression within a key institution in Cho’s church: the cell group system. Cho insists that every cell leader must be “filled with the Spirit” in this unambiguous, traditional Pentecostal way.⁶

Dependence upon the Holy Spirit is essential if a person is to lead the members of his cell group. In our church that means the leader must be baptized in the Holy Spirit, with the evidence of speaking in tongues. Then we are assured of a person who can lead others to Christ and who can pray powerfully for the people’s needs. This is particularly essential in praying for physical and spiritual healing.⁷

I would describe Cho as an “unreconstructed” Pentecostal as far as his doctrine of Spirit-baptism is concerned. I intend the term to be taken as a compliment, for I regard the traditional understanding as a strength rather than a liability. Much of Cho’s teachings are set within a basic framework of Evangelical and Pentecostal orthodoxy. This gives many of his teachings a solid grounding in the larger Christian tradition.

Cho may be unwittingly traditional in other ways too. His Bible Study for New Christians shows that much of what Cho considers basic to new Christians is also widely shared by other Christians. I find it interesting that included in his “basics” for new Christians are the Lord’s Prayer and the Ten Commandments, two of the three components found in traditional catechisms.⁸ The Lord’s Prayer occupies a special place in Cho’s teaching on prayer.⁹

Some of Cho’s teachings regarding the Spirit which have come under attack by some Evangelicals may have much deeper roots in the Christian tradition than his Evangelical critics realize. E.g., the controversial idea of “visualization” seems to have its counterpart in the medieval idea that what we see intensely would be impressed upon the soul and transform it. In Ignatius Loyola’s meditations, extensive images of gospel scenes are vividly visualized. Using “composition of place” as Ignatius calls it, one places oneself in the very scene that one creates

⁵ *Successful Home Cell Groups* (Seoul: Seoul Logos, 1997), pp. v-vi.

⁶ *Successful Home Cell Groups*, pp. 111, 112.

⁷ *Successful Home Cell Groups*, p. 112.

⁸ E.g., *The Catechism of the Catholic Church* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist, 1994).

⁹ See his *Praying with Jesus* (Altamonte Springs, FL: Creation House, 1987).

imaginatively and in the process one becomes deeply affected by it. The final outcome is a transformed soul who is now in a position to be led by God's Spirit to make a major decision. Similar techniques are also found in Puritan devotional manuals in the seventeenth century. The Puritan Isaac Ambrose describes what happens when the Christian "looks" intensely at Jesus:

God receives none to contemplate his face but he transforms them into his own likeness by the irradiation of his light, and Christ hath none that dive into these depths of his glorious and blessed incarnation but they carry along with them sweet impressions of an abiding and transforming nature.¹⁰

Cho's understanding of the spiritual progress of the Christian owes much to earlier holiness and Keswick teachings. This is seen especially in his exposition of the first of the threefold blessing: the prosperity of the soul. Human nature is understood in trichotomous terms reminiscent of Watchman Nee.¹¹ Advance in the Christian life involves the progressive conquest of the "soulish" life by the Holy Spirit through hardships, trials, etc. until the Christian is totally surrendered to the Lord.¹² Cho also insists that being baptized in the Holy Spirit is not enough; believers must also be led by the Spirit continually and have "continuous fellowship with God as the Holy Spirit leads them."¹³ The fivefold gospel which includes Spirit-baptism must be applied to daily living as the threefold blessing which includes continuous filling with the Spirit.¹⁴

There are a number of other promising ideas that are left largely undeveloped. For example, Cho recognizes not only different "kinds" of prayer but degrees of prayer, which reflect older strands of Christian spirituality. "Unison prayer together with others is more beneficial to young believers because one can hear what he is praying for and at the

¹⁰ *Looking Unto Jesus* (1658), p. 350.

¹¹ As seen in Nee's popular study of theological anthropology, *The Spiritual Man*, vols. 12-14 of *The Collected Works of Watchman Nee* (Anaheim, CA: Living Stream Ministry, 1992).

¹² *Salvation, Healing and Prosperity: Our Threefold Blessings in Christ* (Altamonte Spring: Creation House, 1987), ch. 2. The book was first published in Korean in 1977.

¹³ *Born to Be Blessed*, pp. 119-120.

¹⁴ *Born to Be Blessed*, pp. 119-120, cf. pp. 123-24.

same time the sound of others praying together encourage him to pray fervently or learn to pray fervently at the same time.” “However, only those who have had disciplined prayer lives for years are able to pray quietly or silently.”¹⁵ Another example: when Cho refers to the Holy Spirit as the one who spans the ages by making present the great events of the past,¹⁶ there is much potential for such an understanding to be further developed, as can be seen in the pneumatology of Eastern Orthodoxy.¹⁷ I would like to suggest that if Cho’s pneumatology were to become an adequate basis for his other teachings and practices, these pneumatological motifs need to be systematically elaborated.

II. A Practical Pneumatology

I suppose Cho’s response would be that of a practitioner rather than a theologian of the Pentecostal faith. He is more concerned with implementing what he believes to be true rather than reflecting on the truth and drawing out its larger ramifications. This brings me to my next point. I would characterize Cho’s pneumatology as a practical pneumatology.

I have just noted above that Cho insists that all his cell group leaders be filled with the Spirit in the classical Pentecostal sense. Quite clearly Cho’s pneumatology suffuses his organization and cell group system. The nature of the cell meetings includes “ministry to one another” and “making it clear to everyone that the Holy Spirit works in those meetings just as He does in the church services.”¹⁸ Pneumatology is a practical, working reality and not just a doctrine.

This practical pneumatology is translated into a way of life that includes extraordinary and unpredictable features. Cho’s books are peppered with extraordinary but real-life stories. For example, when Cho affirms that the Spirit gives power and boldness, righteousness, peace and joy, all these are not just a matter of talk but are actual experiences. There is always a real-life story to confirm the teaching. The stories are

¹⁵ *Born to be Blessed*, p. 19.

¹⁶ *Praying with Jesus* (Altamonte Springs, FL: Creation House, 1987), p. 18.

¹⁷ On this, see my article “Mother Church: Toward a Pentecostal Ecclesiology,” *Pneuma: Journal of the Society for Pentecostal Studies* 22:2 (Fall 2000), pp. 177-208.

¹⁸ *Successful Home Cell Groups*, p. 114.

not just of ordinary boldness, righteousness, etc., but boldness of an extraordinary kind.

The story of Pastor Kim, an associate of Cho, who fell asleep in the snow and was kept warm through the night by a mountain tiger sleeping on top of him, confirms not any ordinary boldness but a distinctively Pentecostal boldness which can only be attributed to the work of the Holy Spirit.

The moving story of a politician, Miss Park, who made her peace with God after being caught by a North Korean soldier, and her prayer for her executioner as she was led out to be shot that brought the soldier to his knees—this is not about ordinary peace and joy. It is a peace “that passeth all understanding” and a joy that borders on recklessness and defiance, something that is wrought unmistakably by the Spirit of God in the human heart.¹⁹

I am inclined to think that the attractiveness of Cho’s pneumatology owes much to his demonstrating that larger-than-life experiences can happen to any Christian through the powerful working of the Holy Spirit. The very size of his church itself is one such evidence.

III. The Person of the Spirit in the Trinity

When practical pneumatology plays such a critical role in so many aspects of the Christian life and ministry, it is understandable that the Holy Spirit should become the subject of Cho’s special attention. This is one of the great strengths of Cho’s pneumatology, especially when the person of the Holy Spirit is understood within the framework of a classical Pentecostal theology, as noted above.

But there is one aspect of his emphasis with which one must take issue. Cho considers the Holy Spirit as the “senior partner” in God’s business of winning souls.²⁰ But if the Holy Spirit is to function effectively as the senior partner the Christian must learn to cultivate intimate “fellowship with the Spirit.” By this he means that Christians need to have an intimate relationship with the person of the Spirit.

¹⁹ *A Call in the Night*, pp. 92-98

²⁰ *The Fourth Dimension*, vol. 2, *More Secrets for a Successful Faith Life* (Plainfield, NJ: Bridge Publishing, 1983), p. 11-14.

He's a person—but a person who lives inside me. To live with a person means to have fellowship with that person. It means recognition of each other. It means intimate fellowship and communication.²¹

Cho seems to think that fellowship with the Holy Spirit is much like fellowship with the Father and with the Son (1 John 1:3).²²

...when we read the Bible, it not only commands us to have fellowship with the Father and with His Son, Jesus Christ, it also commands us to have fellowship, or *communion* with the Holy Spirit (2 Cor 13:14).²³

Thus he would encourage direct address to the Spirit just as one would address the Father and the Son:

Nowadays I always force myself to recognize the Holy Spirit, to welcome the Holy Spirit and to worship the Holy Spirit, because He is a person.... Dear Holy Spirit, I welcome you, I recognize you and I love you. I depend upon you.... Dear Holy Spirit, now I'm starting. Let's go. Supply all the knowledge and wisdom and discernment, and I'm going to give it out to the people.... Dear Holy Spirit, we did a wonderful job together, didn't we? Praise God!²⁴

Cho seems to think of the triune God as simply three coordinates with whom we sustain an intimate relationship. Just as we pray to the Father and to the Son, we should also pray to the Spirit. But is this the way Scripture understands the place of the Spirit in the Christian life?

There is no question that the scripture links *koinonia* specifically to the ministry of the Holy Spirit, but I have serious difficulty seeing the link in the way Cho does. It is almost certain that the Pauline benediction in 2 Cor 13:14 does not speak of communion with the Spirit but communion of the Spirit. Whether we take "of the Spirit" as a subjective genitive or objective genitive, the phrase cannot possibly be construed in the way Cho construes it. Most commentators favor the subjective genitive; that is to say, it is the Spirit who creates the fellowship of

²¹ *Successful Home Cell Groups*, p. 120.

²² *Successful Home Cell Groups*, p. 121.

²³ *Successful Home Cell Groups*, p. 124. See also *The Holy Spirit, My Senior Partner* (Altamonte Springs: Creation House, 1989), pp. 17-19.

²⁴ *Successful Home Cell Groups*, p. 124. Cf. *The Fourth Dimension*, vol. 2, pp. 9-11. Here, Cho speaks of "fellowship with the Holy Spirit" as a new thing God revealed to him in 1964.

believers. The subjective genitive would be consistent with the two preceding phrases: grace of Jesus Christ and love of God.²⁵ If it is understood as an objective genitive it has the meaning of the Holy Spirit as “the object in which Christian people share.”²⁶ In brief, the Holy Spirit is not the one with whom we fellowship, but the one who creates or makes possible the fellowship of believers (subjective genitive) or the one in whom all believers have fellowship (objective genitive). The objective genitive is the obvious construction of 1 Cor 12:13: “we were all made to drink of one Spirit” (NASV). The idea here is that all Christians share the same Spirit. They are in fellowship with one another because of the one Spirit they all receive.²⁷ In either case, the relevant texts say nothing about our personal fellowship with the Holy Spirit. In fact, there is not one instance in the New Testament where believers are said to have direct fellowship with the Spirit.

Certainly we need to recognize the Holy Spirit as a person, but to do so is to recognize his distinctive role in the triune relationship. While the scripture is clear about directly addressing our prayer to God the Father and to the Son, there is no instance of prayer directed to the Spirit. Historically, there are few instances of prayer to the Spirit.²⁸ This is because in the triune relationship, the Holy Spirit, as Yves Congar puts it in his magisterial study on the Holy Spirit, is always the one who points us to the Father and the Son. The Spirit is the person “without a personal face.”²⁹ The Spirit’s role as the third person in the divine economy of salvation is not to draw attention to himself, but to point us to the Son. The Spirit is glorified precisely when Christ is glorified.

²⁵ See commentaries by F. F. Bruce, *Second Corinthians*, New Century Bible Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971), in loc.; Jan Lambrecht, SJ, *Second Corinthians* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical, 1999), in loc.

²⁶ Colin Kruse, *Second Corinthians*, Tyndale series (Leicester: IVP, 1971), p. 224.

²⁷ See Gordon Fee, *First Corinthians*, New International Commentary of the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987) in loc.

²⁸ The classic study of Josef A. Jungmann, *The Place of Christ in Liturgical Prayers*, trans. A. Peeler (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1965, 1989), p. 221 shows that prayers to the Holy Spirit “attained significance only in Armenia (p. 221). They are rarely found elsewhere, such as in the Byzantine liturgies from the seventeenth century (p. 84). They are found most frequently in prayers addressed to the Holy Trinity, and are motivated by the concern to protect the equality of the Spirit with the Father and the Son (pp. 220-21).

²⁹ Yves Congar, *I Believe in the Holy Spirit*, III (New York: Seabury, 1983), p. 5.

Again, when Cho refers to speaking in tongues as speaking the language of the Spirit, he sees it as the language of personal communication and intimacy with the Holy Spirit.³⁰ But is this the way the scripture understands glossolalia? Glossolalia, as I have argued in my book *Pentecostal Theology and the Christian Spiritual Tradition*, is indeed the language of intimacy. But intimacy with whom? The intimacy is not with the Spirit, but with God the Father to whom we speak by the indwelling Spirit “with unutterable groanings” (cf. Rom 8:26). It is the Spirit who creates the intimacy between the believers and God the Father. The Spirit, as Augustine tells us, is the bond of love between the Father and the Son. He is also the bond of love between the children of God and their heavenly Father. The Spirit is the one who dwells within us to enable us to address God as “Abba, Father” (Rom 8:15).

Unless we recognize the distinctive role of the Spirit in relation to the Father and the Son as revealed in the scripture, there is a danger of giving to the Spirit an independent status and to divorce the work of the Spirit from the Father and the Son. The result, as the history of the church has shown, can be an unbridled enthusiasm that places a special premium on extraordinary phenomenon and supernaturalistic manifestations. It is a short way to making special manifestations of the Spirit an independent object of interest. I am not saying that Cho is guilty of this. On other occasions Cho’s understanding of the Spirit comes closer to the truth, as when he rightly understands the Spirit as the one who brings to us the love of God and the grace of Jesus Christ, or, when he says, “God wants us to have intimate fellowship with Him through the Holy Spirit.”³¹ Unfortunately such understandings are not developed in his discussion on the Holy Spirit.

The problem of Cho’s pneumatology is that it suffers from a lack of precision, with the result that the personal work of the Spirit is misconstrued. Cho’s point seems to be that because the Holy Spirit is a person, therefore, we ought to have the same relationship with him as we have with the Father and the Son.³² This is to misunderstand the trinitarian relationship as revealed in the scripture. The problem with Cho’s construal of the Spirit will become apparent when we examine his teaching of the “threefold blessing.” A more nuanced pneumatology could have been derived by attending more closely to the language of the scripture and to the historic teachings of the Church.

³⁰ *Successful Home Cell Groups*, p. 132.

³¹ *Successful Home Cell Groups*, p. 132.

³² *Born to Be Blessed* (Seoul: Seoul Logos, 1993), p. 14.

IV. The Fivefold Gospel and Threefold Blessing

The fivefold gospel with a threefold blessing is a central motif in Cho's preaching, but it is also the most controversial. Its centrality can be seen in the fact that Cho regards the threefold blessing as an intrinsic part of the "full gospel." As he puts it, the "truths of these threefold blessings of Christ are the foundation stones which formed my faith" and "the philosophical basis for my preaching of the gospel."³³ Cho finds support for the threefold blessing in the Abrahamic promise. God's blessing of Abraham and the giving of that blessing to the gentiles is taken to mean that all Christians should receive the threefold blessing of salvation, health and wealth. But the *locus classicus* is 3 John 2: "Beloved, I wish above all things that thou mayest prosper and be in health, even as thy soul prospereth" (KJV).

I think Cho is basically correct to see God's blessing as not purely "spiritual." There is much dualism underlying a "spiritualized" conception of the Christian life in much of Christian history that needs to be corrected. Salvation in the fullest sense includes the renewal of the physical realm. I think Cho is also right to see in the redemptive work of Jesus the reversal of the curse of original sin, and that God's original blessing to Adam was not purely "spiritual" but had very much an earthly dimension. The relationship between the threefold blessing and the "full gospel" is well summed up in his book *A Bible Study for New Christians*:

There are seven aspects of Full Gospel Faith. The doctrinal conversion of the message of the seven aspects of Full Gospel faith is now called the Fivefold Gospel. The applicational conversion is called the Threefold Blessing. As Christians, we can confirm through the Threefold Blessing the fruit of Christ's redemption, the Fivefold Gospel.³⁴

I think Cho is again right in seeing pneumatology as undergirding the threefold blessing.³⁵ Cho believes that the Holy Spirit gives to

³³ *Salvation, Health and Prosperity*, p. 5.

³⁴ *A Bible Study for New Christians* (Seoul: Seoul Logos, 1997), p. 47.

³⁵ In the second volume of *The Fourth Dimension*, Cho begins his discussion with a chapter on the Holy Spirit, thus showing the centrality of pneumatology in the development of the threefold blessing.

believers “dreams and visions” to enable them to experience the blessing of Abraham in the threefold manner.

Visions and glorious dreams are a part of our Christian walk. The Holy Spirit places them in our hearts to encourage us in our faith. All of a man’s activity is unfolded through his dreams.... Yes, the fundamental power to overcome hardships comes from having a dream in the heart.... You can be strong when you have a dream for a better tomorrow.... My prayer...is that you will have more abundantly according to the three-fold blessings of salvation and the five-fold message of the gospel.³⁶

The way by which the Spirit brings forth the threefold blessing is more fully elaborated in *The Fourth Dimension*. Cho believes that there is a spiritual realm, the “fourth dimension,” that controls the physical, three-dimensional world. It is a realm in which three distinct spirits can be identified: the Holy Spirit, the devil and the human spirit.³⁷

The spirit is the fourth dimension. Every human being is a spiritual being as well as a physical being. They have the fourth dimension as well as the third dimension in their hearts.... So men, by exploring their spiritual sphere of the fourth dimension through the development of concentrated visions and dreams in their imaginations, can brood over and incubate the third dimension, influencing and changing it.³⁸

But this ability to control the physical through the spiritual dimension can be done either through the evil spirit or the Holy Spirit. Cho believes that it is the former that accounts for the miracles in non-Christian religions and philosophies.³⁹ We, the Christians, however, “can link our spirit’s fourth dimension to the fourth dimension of the Holy Father—the Creator of the universe—we can have all the more dominion over circumstances.”⁴⁰ The Holy Spirit does this by giving to us dreams and visions, and through “visualizing” them we could “incubate our

³⁶ *Born to Be Blessed*, pp. 125-26.

³⁷ *The Fourth Dimension: The Key to Putting Your Faith to Work for a Successful Life* (Plainfield, NJ: Logos, 1979).

³⁸ *Fourth Dimension*, pp. 39-40.

³⁹ *Fourth Dimension*, p. 40.

⁴⁰ *Fourth Dimension*, p. 41.

future” and “hatch the results.”⁴¹ Cho is quick to point out that this is not a simple process, but requires us to speak the *rhema*-word which “releases Christ.”⁴² *Rhema* is a word from God: “a specific word to a specific person in a specific situation.”⁴³ *Rhema* comes from “waiting upon the Lord.”⁴⁴ Cho goes to great lengths to specify the conditions under which God’s *rhema* is received: the will needs to be surrendered to God; desires must be sanctified and “screened” by the written word of God; one must wait for God’s signal to move and be spiritually sensitive to God’s timing.⁴⁵ One detects a robust asceticism which is characteristic of many traditional forms of spirituality. This is another commendable feature of Cho’s teaching that is often forgotten by many modern Charismatics looking for quick success in ministry.

Cho’s threefold blessing—more precisely, the health and wealth components of it—is perhaps the least traditional aspect of an otherwise very traditional Pentecostal orthodoxy. One can understand why it has received considerable attention from both critics as well as sympathizers. The latter would often point out that Cho’s prosperity teaching should be understood in the context of poverty in Korea rather than in terms of the North American context where it has tended to be wedded to a consumerist culture.⁴⁶ But it could be argued that if Cho’s teaching on the subject is contextual, so also is Kenneth Hagin’s. What makes the contextualization of Cho’s message right and the other wrong? What are the criteria by which we justify Cho’s teaching on prosperity and question Kenneth Hagin’s? Does the situation of poverty alone justify such a teaching? Are we to assume that there are no other options? These questions highlight the need for criteria other than sociological ones if Cho’s threefold blessing is to be properly evaluated.

If we look into the history of the church we will see that the issue of poverty was also very real. The kind of prosperity that we know of today

⁴¹ *Fourth Dimension*, p. 44

⁴² *Fourth Dimension*, p. 81.

⁴³ *Fourth Dimension*, p. 91.

⁴⁴ *Fourth Dimension*, pp. 97-100.

⁴⁵ *Fourth Dimension*, pp. 106-113.

⁴⁶ Papers presented in the first Youngsan International Theological Symposium in Hansei University, Gunpo, Korea in Sept 2002, under the theme, “Dr. Yonggi Cho’s Theology: A Theological Paradigm for the 21st Century.” See especially the articles by Allan Anderson (pp. 34-35) and Hwa Yung (pp. 98-100). The revised versions of these studies are now published in this issue of the journal.

was quite unknown in the ancient world and for much of human history. Why is it that the church in the past did not come up with the “prosperity” answer that seems to come so naturally to a number of modern Christians? We cannot rule out the fact that it is only in the modern world of mass production and distribution of goods that the prosperity teaching as it is understood today is made plausible. In other words, it is essentially a modern response to a modern situation and would not have been possible in the past. I am not saying that just because it is modern it is wrong; all I am saying is that we need at least to consider the wisdom of the ancient church and recognize other possible responses. One option in the past was the voluntary acceptance of poverty as a way of life. It is of interest to note that the acceptance of poverty was taught precisely in the context of mass poverty, whereas today, it is offered (quite rightly) as an antidote to a consumerist culture.⁴⁷

Another possible response has come from the Calvinist doctrine of vocation. According to Calvin, every person is given a calling by God and one must faithfully exercise oneself in his or her calling.⁴⁸ Calvin makes no distinction between what we now call “full time” calling into the ministry and “secular” vocation. He recognizes the difference of callings, but insists that one is as much a divine calling as the other. There is no bifurcation of life into “sacred” and “secular.” It is this concept of calling that produced in the subsequent century what Max Weber calls the puritan work ethic which over time generated wealth.⁴⁹ But it must also be noted that the focus of the doctrine of vocation is not on wealth but on the need to be faithful to the divine calling. The fact that in time one becomes wealthy as a result of being diligent in the exercise of one’s calling is quite incidental. “Blessing” is never the focus of attention; it is only a by-product. Cho’s teaching, however, sometimes gives the impression of a fixation on “blessings” especially when blessings are seen as part and parcel of the “full gospel.” The problem is not the threefold blessing per se, as noted earlier, but the way it is understood in relation to the doctrine of the Spirit.

In other words, besides learning from history, the threefold blessing needs to be evaluated according to theological criteria or, more specifically, the pneumatological criterion. Theologically, the real

⁴⁷ E.g., Richard Foster, *The Freedom of Simplicity* (London: SPCK, 1981).

⁴⁸ *Institutes of the Christian Religions* 3.10.6.

⁴⁹ Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, trans. Talcott Parsons (New York: Charles Scribner’s, 1958), esp. 98-128.

problem with the threefold blessing is that it is set within an inadequate conception of salvation-history. This misconception of salvation-history is in turn due to a failure to understand the proper role of the Holy Spirit in the economy of salvation. What is needed is a more nuanced doctrine of the Spirit that steers between the extremes of an under-realized and an over-realized eschatology. In the Scripture, the Spirit is the “foretaste” of the new creation. What we have now is a “downpayment” not the fullness of the reality. We need to maintain the tension between the “already” and “not yet” if we are to maintain the threefold blessing biblically and with integrity.⁵⁰ In fact, this tension is implicit in the fivefold gospel. The fourth component of the fivefold gospel (namely “blessing”) must be seen in relation to the fifth component: the return of Christ and the fullness of the new creation. The presence of the Spirit now, is a reminder of the absent Christ.⁵¹ The basic mistake of Cho’s theology of the threefold blessing is that he sees it as confirming the fivefold gospel. What should be said is that the threefold blessing partially confirms the fivefold gospel. They are a foretaste of a reality that will only be fully realized at the second coming of Christ. This is what it means when the scripture refers to the Spirit as a “pledge” or “deposit” that guarantees the full inheritance which is still future (2 Cor 1:22; 5:5; Eph 1:14). The fivefold gospel, therefore, cannot be simply resolved into the threefold blessing without distinguishing between present and future fulfillments. There is a dimension of the gospel, namely, the return of Christ and the full redemption of the body that lies in the future. The physical dimension of the divine blessing in this present age is given provisionally. If the provisional nature of divine blessing is recognized it would make a difference to the way it is applied. Take, for instance, the matter of prosperity. Although Cho acknowledges that there are “special reasons” for poverty, including the legitimacy of voluntary poverty, these are only given passing mention. Cho seems to think that if there is legitimate poverty in the Christian life, it is meant either to be temporary in order to test one’s faith or for a very small number of people who are given an exceptional calling, such as the

⁵⁰ Cho acknowledges the present and future aspects of the kingdom of God, but in practice the accent falls almost exclusively on the present. See *More Than Numbers* (Waco, TX: Word, 1984), pp. 77-80.

⁵¹ For a fuller account of this, see Douglas Farrow, *Ascension and Ecclesia: On the Significance of the Doctrine of the Ascension for Ecclesiology and Christian Cosmology* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1999).

Apostle Paul.⁵² For all practical purposes, the positive reality is the only reality that matters; the negative reality is banished to the fringe of the Christian life, applicable only to a few exceptional cases. The “not yet” is virtually swallowed up by the “already.” This is not a faithful representation of biblical eschatology.

The failure to take biblical eschatology seriously is seen again in the way Cho answers the question: why are not all healed? The reasons Cho gives are: 1) People do not wait on the Lord for the *rhema* to be given; 2) They are not right with God; 3) They must wait for God’s time; and 4) Sometimes God does not deliver us in order to accomplish a greater good, such as the salvation of others.⁵³ Nowhere does Cho anticipate the possibility that God’s *rhema*—his specific word in a specific situation—to a sick person may be: “Son/daughter, I am going to take you home in this illness.” (This was the case with Hezekiah’s illness in Isaiah 38.) The whole emphasis is on “thinking positively, thinking in terms of miracles and developing an orientation to success” as the conditions for receiving a *rhema*-word from God.⁵⁴ How does such an emphasis square with the acknowledgment that healing is according to God’s sovereign will?⁵⁵ Does God’s *rhema* have no room for any results other than positive ones? While Cho in theory allows for God’s *rhema* to be decisive, in reality it is our own positive thinking that determines how God’s *rhema* will come to us. Properly understood, the *rhema* teaching could become a powerful means of opening up the Christian to a life described by Joyce Hugget as “listening to God” in life’s specific situations.⁵⁶ This is how we can expect relationship with the personal, triune God to be; it is not just a matter of going by general principles and rules. The problem is not with Cho’s teaching on *rhema* as such, but *rhema* wedded to an over-realized eschatology.

Another feature of the threefold blessing is that it tends to be applied selectively. For example, the environmental blessing that offsets the environmental curse is understood exclusively in social and

⁵² See *Salvation, Health and Prosperity*, pp. 55-56, 68.

⁵³ *Fourth Dimension*, pp. 100-104.

⁵⁴ *Fourth Dimension*, p. 151.

⁵⁵ *Fourth Dimension*, p. 101.

⁵⁶ Joyce Hugget, *Listening to God* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1986), pp. 28-31. A similar idea can be found in the seventeenth century spiritual writer Jean-Pierre de Caussade, *The Sacrament of the Present Moment*, trans. Kitty Muggerridge (New York: HarperCollins, 1989).

psychological terms; the ecological dimension is conspicuously missing. Speaking of the removal of the environmental curse he says, “we are removed from the curse of poverty; we are made rich.”⁵⁷ In place of the “thorns of hatred, anxiety, unrest, fear, and failure...our hearts will overflow with the ever flowing river of peace.”⁵⁸ This is clearly a selective understanding of environmental blessing. In Genesis the curse clearly covered the physical environment. Obviously, real thorns and thistles are not yet removed from the earth, although in recent years some “Third Wavers” are claiming that this is happening in certain parts of Latin America: the healing of the land is alleged to be taking place. But even if there is real healing of the physical earth as there is real healing of the physical body, such healings are at best “foretastes.”

Much damage has been done when “divine healing” ministries highlight only the “already” but choose to remain silent about the “not yet.” Furthermore, when physical healing becomes the most prominent feature in the divine healing ministry, it will only raise false expectations and unresolved tensions. Pastorally, how are we to help people who come expecting healing but are not physically healed? Is there no place for a *rhema* from the Lord like Isaiah’s word to Hezekiah: “This is what the Lord says: Put your house in order, because you are going to die; you will not recover”? It is of interest to note that Hezekiah miraculously recovered after he prayed. But the consequences were grave. He became proud and callous (Isa 39, see esp. v. 8) and during that fifteen years of his extended life he sired Manasseh, one of the most wicked kings of Judah. When the starting-point of one’s theology is an over-realized eschatology, the question why all are not healed becomes an intractable problem. It is then rationalized away, sidestepped, soft-pedaled or ignored. Any responsible answer to this question must begin with a pneumatology that takes full cognizance of the provisional nature of the present age—the age of the Spirit between Pentecost and the *Parousia*.

V. An Evaluation

A congregation that continues to grow for the last forty years to become the largest in the world needs some explaining, even if one does not believe that size is proof of soundness. One way to account for the continuing dynamism of the Yoido Full Gospel Church is in terms of

⁵⁷ *Bible Study*, p. 63.

⁵⁸ *Bible Study*, p. 64.

Bruce Reed's "oscillation theory."⁵⁹ Dynamic religions go through a pattern of oscillating between what Reed calls "intra-dependence" and "extra-dependence." Intra-dependence is a phase in which believers are engaged in institutional religion with a sense of self-assurance, while extra-dependence refers to the sense of dependence on something outside of oneself for sustenance. The oscillation between the two is what he calls "process," while the attempt to give meaning to or "institutionalize" the process is what he calls "movement." There is a "symbiotic" relationship between "process" and "movement": "Movement gives form to process; process gives life to movement." Movement serves as "container" to what is "contained," that is the "process."⁶⁰ What we see in Cho's approach to "church growth" is to keep this oscillation pattern on-going with the emphasis on continuous revival ("revival is 365 days") and a cell-group structure in which this revival finds meaningful expression.

But what sort of pneumatology is implied in Cho's attempt to maintain the 365-day-a-year revival? Surprisingly, it is the classical Pentecostal belief in baptism in the Spirit as a subsequent work of the Spirit distinct from the work of conversion, and evidenced by speaking in tongues, followed by continuous fellowship with the Spirit. The Spirit provides the dynamic for the implementation of his distinctive *ordo salutis* (that is, the fivefold gospel and threefold blessing). Cho faithfully keeps to this position, even though this classical Pentecostal belief is being questioned everywhere.⁶¹ Cho maintains the classical position and

⁵⁹ I am indebted to David Reed for the application of the oscillation theory in another context. See his "From Movement to Institution: A Case Study of Charismatic Renewal in the Anglican Church of Canada" (Summary of the Proceedings of the Forty-Fifth Annual Conference of the American Theological Library Association, June 1991), pp. 173-94.

⁶⁰ Bruce D. Reed, *The Dynamics of Religion: Process and Movement in Christian Churches* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1978), p. 121.

⁶¹ While most Protestant Charismatics have rejected the classical Pentecostal distinctive, nonetheless most of them seem to have glossolalia as a central experience—some kind of "initial evidence" experience. See Henry I. Lederle, "Initial Evidence and the Charismatic Movement: An Ecumenical Appraisal," in *Initial Evidence: Historical and Biblical Perspectives on the Pentecostal Doctrine of Spirit Baptism*, ed. Gary G. McGee (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Press, 1991), pp. 131-41 (132). Studies on Charismatics in different contexts seem to confirm this observation. See *We Believe In the Holy Spirit: A Report by the Doctrine Commission of the General Synod of the Church of England*

insists on its being faithfully implemented especially among his key people: the cell group leaders. Cho's stance has demonstrated the practical viability of the classical Pentecostal belief, even though that belief may not have been adequately expressed in the classical Pentecostal statements of faith or convincingly explained by traditional advocates.⁶² I consider the stance Cho takes as the greatest strength of his practical pneumatology.

On the other hand, there is a danger that a practical pneumatology could easily become a pragmatic pneumatology when it is not properly developed under the strict control of the scripture and the scrutiny of the larger church. This danger comes through quite clearly in Cho's many writings. There is a tendency to encourage the cultivation of certain virtues with the aim of gaining practical results. Some of them are:

- 1) Humility and obedience will bring blessings.⁶³
- 2) When we have "special faith" we are "bound to" experience miracles.⁶⁴
- 3) Perseverance in faith and prayer, speaking affirmatively rather than negatively, forgiveness of each other will bring God's miracles into one's life.⁶⁵
- 4) We need to wait upon the Lord for his *rhema* in order to have real success.⁶⁶

This is not to deny that humility, perseverance, etc. will bring blessings. After all, the Bible does tell us that God will exalt those who humble themselves. The problem is that unless we consciously make the effort to distinguish between the aim and the result of an action, the two can very easily be confused. We are to be humble, not in order to be blessed, but because this is what we are meant to be: followers of the

(London: Church House Publishing, 1993), pp. 26, 27 and Reed, "From Movement to Institution," p. 187, cf. p. 191.

⁶² In my book *Pentecostal Theology and the Christian Spiritual Tradition* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000) I have argued that the classical Pentecostal position in fact makes good sense in the light of the larger Christian spiritual tradition..

⁶³ *Born to Be Blessed*, pp. 23-33.

⁶⁴ *Born to Be Blessed*, p. 38.

⁶⁵ *Born to Be Blessed*, pp. 41-46.

⁶⁶ *The Fourth Dimension*, pp. 97-100.

One who humbled himself and became obedient unto death. Blessing is a result but not what we aim at.⁶⁷

The main weakness in Cho's pneumatology lies precisely at the point where he introduces his own distinctive teachings into the "full gospel," namely, the "blessing" in the fivefold gospel. It is a moot point whether Cho's peculiar teaching on the person Holy Spirit in relation to the Trinity (see III above) is the cause or result of his peculiar teaching of the threefold blessing. What is certain is that when pneumatology hangs loose from the doctrine of the Trinity, the Spirit begins to take a life of his own instead of being seen in relation to the triune economy of salvation.

The Spirit is God's distinctive gift to the church between the ascension and the *parousia*. This is the period of redemptive history characterized by what Farrow calls "the ascension/*parousia* differential" in which the Spirit takes the place of the absent Christ.⁶⁸ It is the "interim" between Christ's bodily departure and bodily return. The chief characteristic of this age is that the Spirit brings the past and the future together in the present; it is an age in which the church, especially in the eucharistic celebration, engages in *anamnesis* and *epiclesis*, i.e., in remembering what Christ had done and in anticipating the fuller reality at the *parousia* through the Spirit. In short, in these acts the Spirit holds the "already" of Christ's redemptive work and the "not yet" of Christ's return in a healthy tension in the present age. The problem begins when the tension is resolved in favor of either the "not yet" or the "already." Too much emphasis on the "not yet" produces an under-realized eschatology; the Spirit's work is collapsed into the work of the Son, making it indistinguishable from Christ's. Too much emphasis on the "already" produces an over-realized eschatology. The mission of the Spirit then becomes separated from the mission of the Son.

The problem in Cho's pneumatology, as I have pointed out, is that the tension is resolved in favor of an over-realized eschatology. The

⁶⁷ A similar tendency can be seen in Benny Hinn: one fasts and prays in order to get "the anointing." See his *The Anointing* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1992).

⁶⁸ *Ascension and Ecclesia*, p. 46. It should be noted that Farrow's concern lies elsewhere: he is more concerned with showing the difference between salvation-history and world-history and to rebut a common tendency in modern theology of making the Spirit's work in the world and in the church indistinguishable. In other words, while modern theology seeks to dissolve the 'spatial' differential between the church and world, Cho's pneumatology (and this is also generally true of the "signs and wonder" movement), by contrast, seeks to dissolve the temporal differential between the "now" and the "then."

Spirit's person and work become an object of special attention. This is encapsulated in his designation of the Holy Spirit as "my senior partner." Cho sees mission as essentially a partnership between the Christian and the Holy Spirit as the senior partner. This means that one follows the "dreams and visions" of the Spirit. "If you want to work with the Holy Spirit you must speak His language, the language of visions and dreams."⁶⁹ The issue is not the process of dreaming and visualizing, but what is being dreamed and visualized: it is the unlimited possibilities contained in the gospel of the threefold blessing of salvation, health and wealth. Cho's fivefold gospel and threefold blessing will continue to generate controversy and suspicion unless the eschatological tension is restored; and it can be restored only if his pneumatology is re-rooted in trinitarian theology and sound biblical eschatology.

Cho, however, consciously eschews theological categories and opts for the language of the practitioner of the faith. One could argue that this is the only way to communicate to the "populace" effectively—which is true. But however popular we make our presentation, if we value truth, a measure of conceptual precision is needed to undergird our practical teaching. This is what I find lacking in Cho's teachings. This lack of conceptual precision has two serious consequences.

First, some of Cho's teachings are easily misunderstood because they are not well integrated into the broader framework of his own teaching. Many of Cho's critics miss the mark because they fail to take this fact into account. As a result, Cho has been accused of false teachings that he may not have intended to teach. Dave Hunt and T. A. McMahon, for example, see Cho's visualization technique as a case of shamanism.⁷⁰ But Cho has explicitly distinguished between those who are linked to the Holy Spirit and those who are linked to the devil in the "fourth dimension," and this must surely provide a context for understanding his visualization technique.

Cho also recognizes a third possibility, namely, the capacity of the human spirit to operate in the fourth dimension apart from either the Holy Spirit or evil spirits (the "unconscious").⁷¹ While I do not think that visualization as such can be equated with shamanism in light of the larger

⁶⁹ *A Call in the Night*, Sermon series 1 (Seoul: Seoul Logos, 1983, 2002), p. 83.

⁷⁰ Dave Hunt and T. A. McMahon, *The Seduction of Christianity* (Eugene, Oregon: Christian Life Publications, 1986). The authors simply lump together all forms of "visualization" techniques as dabbling in the territory of the devil (pp. 112-31).

⁷¹ *The Fourth Dimension*, pp. 41-43.

context of the Christian spiritual tradition, it does not mean that there is no danger either. If there is a case for the charge of shamanism it is not in the technique of visualization *per se*, but in the control that one is tempted to exercise over the objects visualized. In Cho's case, the temptation to control is perhaps much greater, especially when the objects are invariably concerned with "blessings." There needs to be adequate safeguards when one delves into the spiritual realm, whether Christian or non-Christian. Without an adequate conceptual framework to make these safeguards explicit—here we can learn much from men like Ignatius Loyola and Jonathan Edwards to "discern the spirits"—the possibility of abuse of power will always be present and the charge of shamanism will not easily go away.

Perhaps a more pertinent example is when Cho says that *rhema* "releases Jesus" or use some such terms that seem to suggest the human ability to control God. This could easily be misconstrued as quasi-magical and another piece of evidence of shamanistic influence. But Cho also tells us that *rhema* comes to those who are sensitized to the Holy Spirit through long waiting upon God. What he is saying, then, is not very different from the Desert Fathers, who believe that through close communion with God, one may be given a special prophetic word suitable for a specific occasion.⁷² Again, what I find lacking is an explicit theology that links *rhema* to a holistic spirituality that safeguards the use of *rhema*.

Another consequence of theological imprecision is that some seeking to replicate his success might easily turn his teachings into "formulas for success" without considering the larger spiritual context in which these teachings are set. The *rhema*-word is a good example of a practice that can be easily abused (e.g., the Kansas City prophets). There is no assurance that the controls that keep Cho's practical pneumatology from becoming purely pragmatic (such as his own personal integrity) will function effectively with those who try to replicate his strategy for success. This is why it is necessary for those controls to be consciously built in as part of a coherent theology. E.g., a proper theology of the threefold blessing must include, among other things, some warning of possible abuse (especially in the light of the human propensity to love things above God), and the recognition of the place of poverty and

⁷² Kallistos Ware, "The Spiritual Father in Orthodox Christianity," in *Spiritual Direction: Contemporary Readings*, ed. Kevin G. Culligan, O.C.D. (Locus Valley, NY: Living Flame Press, 1983), pp. 21-23.

sickness as part of a holistic spirituality within the context of a sound, biblical eschatology.

VI. Conclusion

When I began the study of Cho's pneumatology, I must confess to having strong reservations about it. My previous view of Cho had been formed more by what I had read about him than what I had read by him. But after going through many of his writings, my earlier reservations have been considerably reduced, but not entirely removed. I am hopeful that a strong underlying spirituality, expressed in terms of the classical Pentecostal doctrine of Spirit-baptism, continuous in-filling of the Spirit, and a rigorous spiritual discipline,⁷³ could serve as a safeguard against abuses, but it needs to be made explicit and brought directly to bear on his threefold blessing. But I still have my remaining reservations. They have to do with a pneumatology that is so loosely conceived that it threatens to overwhelm the orthodox trinitarian doctrine, and an eschatology that tends to swallow up the future. I am also confident that within Cho's overall scheme of things the threat can be overcome and the tendency corrected, but unless they are actually overcome and corrected my reservations will remain.

⁷³ I have not discussed this third element at length as it is not directly pertinent to this paper.