

(Part 2) Glocality and Covenant: Korean American Interchurch Unity

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This essay is the second of the three part series that attempts to demonstrate how the global dialectic of convergence and divergence is playing out in the Korean American church, particularly in regards to its communal vision.¹ The previous essay argued for a full-fledged and intentional intergenerational ministry, as the currently popular convergence of leadership in bilingual senior pastors is not enough to respond to the dialectic of global divergence.² This essay extends the discussion of intra-church relationships outlined in the first essay to that of inter-church relationships, exploring church-to-church relations in an increasingly globalizing world.³ In order to achieve such a task, a very brief history of the Korean and Korean American churches that focuses on their unity and disunity resulting from the paradoxical global dialectic is presented first. Then, the currently shallow relationship among Korean American churches is described in the light of their failure to recognize their own glocality. Lastly, a covenantal interchurch ministry is proposed as a possible solution.

The 130-year old history of evangelizing the Korean peninsula began with a growth spurt not short of an unprecedented miracle. While mission work in other Asian countries had been mostly fruitless for decades, the Korean church grew to 200,000 members and sent out three missionaries of its own within 30 years of the first effort to proselytize Koreans.⁴ This effort was also unique in its notable unity: the various denominations of the Protestant churches in the United States, Canada, and Australia intentionally worked together to evangelize Korea.⁵ Although churches elsewhere were established via unified mission effort, the Korean church was organized via a comity arrangement, which developed a common hymnal and liturgy, and attempted to officially establish a single Christian church on the land.⁶ In fact, the Korean church

¹ Hak Joon Lee, *The Great World House: Martin Luther King, Jr. and Global Ethics* (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 2011), 48. According to Lee, “communal emphasizes the strength of the bond and mutual obligation based on the kinship of humanity in God.” Community does not have to be culturally homogenous, even though the Korean-American Church is indeed largely so. Communal is in contrast with the political, which deals with engagement in social justice. The communal and the political both play out dialectically within local and global contexts in the four pillars of ethics: vision, norms, virtues, and practices. As claimed, this paper is concerned with one specific area of this complex ethical structure – communal vision. As stated in essay 1, “...many entities experience a paradoxical need of becoming the same yet different (1).”

² James Hyonroh Lee, “Lost in Translation: Silent Exodus and the Korean-American Church,” <http://aatfweb.org/2014/10/31/lost-in-translation-silent-exodus-and-the-korean-american-church/>

³ Citing intergenerational reconciliation and unity, I claim that “Congregation to congregation interaction is not likely (5)” in essay 1. Though such interaction is indeed rare at this time, this essay argues that it is warranted, and speculates how it may take place.

⁴ In Soo Kim, *A History of Christianity in Korea* [my translation] vol.1 (Seoul: Qumran, 2012), 263. In comparison, there were none, two, and three converts in the first 30 years of mission work in Mongolia, Thailand, and China respectively. Of course, mission work may not be judged by the number of conversions alone, but the overwhelmingly significant difference between the rate of Christianity growth in Korea and that of many other Asian countries must be noted.

⁵ Kim, 334-336.

⁶ Examples of “elsewhere” includes Taiwan and India, where united mission work resulted in establishing churches that have been contributing meaningfully to worldwide Christianity.

still uses a common hymnal and reads a single translation of the Bible, even though the western churches that brought the Gospel to them do not.⁷ Moreover, many early Korean Christians were at the forefront of resistance against the imperialistic Japanese rule, uniting not only Korean Christians but also the entire country. In other words, church in Korea began with a spirit of theological, liturgical, and social unity that resulted from ecumenism aided by global convergence.

However, when a significant number of Koreans began to move to the United States after 1965, the Korean church denominational differences intensified, and various denominations had split into numerous sects.⁸ For instance, the Presbyterian Church had split into Jesus Presbyterian and Christ Presbyterian, of which the former split again into two separate denominations. There are about 300 Protestant denominations in Korea currently. At the same time, neoliberal capitalism was taking over the western world with the United States as a main player, helping Korea not only to achieve a rags-to-riches economic growth in the 1980s but also to overcome a national financial crisis in the 1990s.⁹ Such drastic financial swing strongly enforced materialism, which mixed with Koreans' historically shamanistic blessing theology and translated into overemphasis of individual church growth in membership and finances.¹⁰ The Korean American church inherited the same trend. Yet its situation quickly worsened, exacerbated by lack of evangelism and immigrant hardships, especially the language barrier which prevented Korean Americans to reach out to other ethnicities, and serious socioeconomic hardships that led them to lean on the church community as a practical refuge rather than a spiritual training ground.¹¹ Along with the increased sectarianism, these trends of the Korean American Christians dismantled much meaningful cooperation between their congregations. Therefore, there were three major levels of the global dialectic in play: the church level theo-ministerial convergence in mission effort in Korea, the state level economic convergence between the United States and Korea, and the individual level sociocultural convergence as well as divergence via immigration.

Against such backdrop, what is the current interchurch relationship like among Korean American churches? While this relationship cannot be reduced into a single category, the overall pattern is one of schism, rather than unity despite efforts for unity. Several inter-denominational bodies exist in the southern/northern California, New York/Jersey, Washington D.C., and Atlanta areas that meet periodically to do charitable work and promote a sense of unity. Annual conferences such as Higher Calling and Korean Students All Nation (KOSTA) take place nationally, drawing many college students to worship together. Joint retreats for youths are happening in states that are not traditionally filled with Korean American Christians, such as

⁷ Although this essay discusses the Korean Protestant church, the Catholic Church also joined in, co-producing a translation of the Bible with the Protestants in Korea. Kim, 227-231

⁸ In Soo Kim, *A History of Christianity in Korea* [my translation] vol.2 (Seoul: Qumran, 2012), 342-345. Denominational color increased partly due to the already existing territorialism of Koreans. Denominational splits happened due to theological and political reasons additionally.

⁹ David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 122. South Korea was forced to restructure its financial system by the International Monetary Fund, whose monetary policies are criticized as one of the causes of the very crisis it helped Korea to overcome.

¹⁰ Hak Joon Lee, *A Paradigm Shift of the Korean Church: A Roadmap for Transformation* [my translation] (Seoul: Holy Wave Plus, 2011), 79-81.

¹¹ Sharon Kim, *A Faith of Our Own: Second-Generation Spirituality in Korean American Churches* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2010), 24, 48 and 116. Of course, church as a socioeconomic refuge may be upheld by various sound ecclesiological approaches. However, the Korean American church is often treated as an opportunity for upward social movement for immigrants who do not receive such chances outside their church communities as mentioned in essay 1 (6).

Oregon and Washington State.¹² Campus organizations such as Korean Campus Crusade for Christ (KCCC) and Korean American Campus Mission (KCM) have been functioning as brooding grounds for Korean American Christians of all denominations. Also, networking organizations on and offline have been gathering Korean American pastors together for ministry discussion and personal encouragement.¹³ Additionally, a movement to create education curriculum for intellectual unity appropriate for Korean American Christian youths has been spearheaded by an interdenominational think tank Generation 2 Generation (G2G).¹⁴

However, these efforts are not enough to overcome the ensuing separation due to the three levels of the global dialectic described earlier. The regional interdenominational bodies often provide surface level ministerial unity in bringing money together to give without church-to-church interaction; there is no effort for theological unity or mutual understanding. They also seem to be poorly run, showing signs of donation events put together at the last minute and even corruption, rather than intentional and prayerful church-to-church collaboration. In fact, the Council of Korean Churches in southern California was recently criticized for its unusual and unethical practice of electing its controversial new president and half-forcing well-recognized local pastors to be on its board.¹⁵ The annual conferences and campus organizations only cater to those who are not in positions to pioneer holistic interchurch ministry in youth and college students. Moreover, as these organizations are often located in higher ranking colleges, their efforts to overcome socioeconomic class division in the long-run is doubtful. Although pastors networking is promising, there seems to be no fruit collected so far, other than occasional co-hosting of summer and winter retreats. The intellectual approach of G2G is new with just two curriculum books published, and their use and impact have yet been analyzed. Though these efforts for interchurch ministry are helpful, they do not seem adequate to generate deep and meaningful interchurch unity in a world rotating on theo-ministerial, socioeconomic, and cultural dialectic of individual, organizational, and international levels.

At the core of this inadequacy lies the Korean American church's ignorance of glocality. Glocality is a hybrid concept of globality and locality: it can be defined as that quality of an entity that is connected to the larger global world while remaining within its unique local context.¹⁶ Glocality is particularly important in an increasingly globalizing world that demands sensitivity to global currents as well as connectivity to local ones. Therefore, an entity's glocality displays its connectivity to global convergence as well as divergence. A typical Korean American church is likely to be well-engaged with the global world via international mission efforts; it is equally likely to be isolated from the local neighborhood in its lack of participation and partnership with the relevant social and institutional fabric. For instance, Korean American

¹² Christianity Daily Seattle, "100 Oregon Youth Receive Christ [my translation]" <http://kr.christianitydaily.com/articles/80983/20141112/%EC%98%A4%EB%A0%88%EA%B3%A4%EC%B2%AD%EC%86%8C%EB%85%84%EB%B6%80%ED%9D%A5%EC%A7%91%ED%9A%8C-100%EC%97%AC%EB%AA%85%EC%9D%98-%ED%95%99%EC%83%9D%EB%93%A4-%EC%98%88%EC%88%98%EB%8B%98-%EC%98%81%EC%A0%91%ED%95%B4.htm>

¹³ Examples of these networks include but are not limited to: Korean-American Pastors Network, NexGen Pastors Fellowship, and Korean American Ministry Resources.

¹⁴ I am currently working as a writer and staff member of G2G. See www.g2gcenter.org for more details. I am intentionally discarding all foreseeable conflict of interest, and confidently claim that my essay series published by AATF is not an effort for promotion of any G2G agenda. However, I do stand by the organization and believe in its values and products.

¹⁵ Jae Young Yang, "How can they? The Council of Korean Churches in southern California [my translation]," <http://www.newsm.com/news/articleView.html?idxno=4449>

¹⁶ Lee, *The Great World House*, 14-16.

churches seldom invest intentionally in local schools, interact meaningfully with the neighborhood people, and work closely with the local authorities. Yet they often have specific goals for overseas mission work and donate significantly to international causes.¹⁷ In other words, Korean American church is holistically global but not local – thus not glocal. Although a few churches may be doing better than others, most churches are operating as lone mavericks, as they do not pursue meaningful interchurch unity as described earlier. Consequently, the Korean American church as a whole is unable to put forth a capable voice in public space, and cultivate a thriving next generation. I believe that the Christian idea of covenant can be a suitable catalyst.

As the overall sentiment regarding the future of the church is pessimistic, several approaches to interchurch ministry have been suggested: participating in more early morning prayer services, hosting more joint worship services, adjusting denominational alignment etc. While these suggestions are helpful, they represent personal, liturgical, and organizational strategies. A theological backbone must be constructed.

Generally speaking, covenant can be defined as a conditional or unconditional binding relationship based on reciprocal trust and communication between two or more persons who voluntarily enter into the relationship for purposes of mutual edification and/or common good.¹⁸ Covenant is different from contract because it is a relational model solely based on the agreement of certain terms for mutual gain in basis, focus, purpose, and expression. Covenant can be made between equal or unequal parties, and tends to be long-lasting; God is seen cutting covenants with humans that are declared to last for eternity.¹⁹ Contract, on the other hand, usually is carried out only with a specific time frame agreed upon by the involved sides. While parties entering a covenantal relationship with each other voluntarily limit themselves, they do so for the sake of focusing on giving to the other, thickening the relationship, and serving a shared purpose, hence guaranteeing reciprocity within the relationship.²⁰ Covenant focuses on giving to the other party rather than on the gifts given or received; contract hinges on the exchanged gifts themselves.²¹ In covenant, parties involved do not seek fairness, but are willing to give what is beyond fair for the sake of the other; contract cannot exist without fair terms.²² Moreover, covenant recognizes the transcendental authority of God that sanctions the relationship, and is often expressed in various rites.²³ Contract generally does not carry transcendent meaning, and is not celebrated ritually. Thus, the core difference between covenant and contract is their opposing assumption of affinity of human relationships: while the former assumes that humans are interdependent, the latter presumes that they are independent.²⁴

¹⁷ As mentioned in essay 1, these trends are more apparent in the first generation-dominated churches. Second generation churches, due to their theology, history, and language ability, are more involved in the local issues. Still, this essay point to the lack of interaction among different Korean American churches, hence the holistic lack of glocality of the Korean American church.

¹⁸ Max L. Stackhouse, *Covenant and Commitments: Faith, Family, and Economic Life* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1997), 141. The content regarding covenant has been researched for a previous personal project.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Max L. Stackhouse, "The Moral Meanings of Covenant," in *The Annual of the Society of Christian Ethics* (1996), 249.

²¹ Margaret F. Brinig, *From Contract to Covenant: Beyond the Laws and Economics of the Family* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000), 130.

²² Ibid.

²³ Stackhouse, *Covenant and Commitments*, 141.

²⁴ Darlene Fozard Weaver, "Moral Agency, Sin, and Grace: Prospects for Christian Hope and Responsibility," in *Covenant and Hope: Christian and Jewish Reflections*, eds. Robert W. Jenson and Eugene B. Korn (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012), 250.

Notably, the interdependence assumed by covenant is both intercultural and intergenerational. In the Old Testament, covenant is intercultural in that a) it promotes positive and negative interactions with cultures of those outside of the covenant, and b) it provides a framework through which those cultures are to be interpreted. For example, God expels Adam out of Eden with a promise of protection;²⁵ God provides Noah a blank world, and mandates him to fill it; God sends Abraham to unfamiliar lands; God sends Moses to the Pharaoh, and gives the Decalogue to Israelites by which to live. In the New Testament, the New Covenant of Jesus Christ takes interculturality further in that this covenant is for the Gentiles to be blessed through the Jews. In other words, the biblical stance on covenant's interculturality culminates as a reconciliatory and mutual edification. As for intergenerationality, biblical covenants are rarely made singularly; they include and affect generations of the past, present, and future: Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

Therefore, covenant can bring together not only the different generations within a particular local church, but also local churches with other local churches through their finer contextual differences. In other words, covenant has the potential to unite the Korean American church deeply enough to organize them appropriately within the theo-ministerial, socioeconomic, and cultural dialectics. Moreover, such interchurch unity means that glocality can be established, as churches gathering in pockets of locales become intertwined for the purposes of mutual edification and common good. Then, the Korean American church can gain a powerful voice in the public square to raise a thriving next generation in the globalizing world; the Korean American church then may be a model of *E Pluribus Unum*. This model and how covenant can be implemented in the Korean American church as a whole to empower this process is explored in essay 3.

²⁵ While some scholars may not categorize God and Adam's relationship as covenanted, the Free Church tradition does. See Hak Joon Lee, *Covenant and Communication: A Christian Moral Conversation with Jürgen Habermas* (Lanham: University Press of America, 2006), 53.