NEW PERSPECTIVE ON MINJUNG THEOLOGY:
FRUITS OF FALSE GOSPEL

BY

LUKE KIM

A PAPER

SUBMITTED TO DR. BRUCE FIELDS
IN FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS
FOR ST 8980: THM MAJOR RESEARCH PAPER
AT TRINITY EVANGELICAL DIVINITY SCHOOL

DEERFIELD, ILLINOIS
MAY 2014
Preface

This paper is composed of two parts. The first part is my previous paper on this topic, which focused on Minjung's doctrine of Christ. Minjung theologians' reinterpretation of Jesus' life (or historical Jesus) provided a basis for Christians to engage in social justice, but their formulation produced an altered gospel. The redefinition of sin became the fulcrum of the new interpretation. In this redefinition, the meaning of sin shifted from a forensic sense to a socio-political sense. The meaning on Jesus' mission and ministry also changed. The contention of the first part of this paper is that the alteration resulted in serious apostasy from genuine faith in the true gospel.

The second part of this paper deals with a contemporary discussion of Minjung theology. Unlike former Minjung theologians, Jin K. Kwon, a contemporary Minjung theologian, incorporates various postmodern themes in Minjung theology. Kwon builds his theology upon a foundation that was laid by the former Minjung theologians. The second part of this paper proposes to use Kevin Vanhoozer's drama of redemption model to describe Kwon's development, and it demonstrates how an altered gospel leads to an altered view of traditional theological categories. As Kwon interacts with traditional Christianity and other religious tradition, new types of fruits are produced. Jesus taught that by observing a person’s fruits, one may discern his teaching (Matt. 7:20). Evaluating these fruits will provide more evidence that support the thesis and first part of this paper.
Part I

Introduction

Minjung theology was developed during President Chung-Hee Park’s administration in Korea (1962-1979). On the one hand, Park administered successful economic plans that caused Korea to accumulate a great amount of wealth. On the other hand, his controversial political policies fractured Korean democracy. In 1972, he dismissed the congress and manipulated the media in order to pass amendments that would give tremendous power to the office of the presidency. Various democratic leaders who opposed these changes were persecuted, which lead to great tension in the country. Furthermore, the increase of wealth and its uneven distribution widened the division between the upper class and the lower class. During this time, politicians had close ties with businesses and the wealthy were able to buy power. This resulted in oppression and exploitation of the lower class. As a response, labor union and various other political movements arose. Some Christians sided with the oppressed to fight for their liberation, and it paved the way for Minjung theology.

Reformed theology and pietistic spirituality characterize Korean Christianity. Their influences came from early missionaries to Korea who were mostly Presbyterian ministers. Korean Christianity, however, began to be more theologically diverse as it grew exponentially. Some Christians started to criticize the Korean churches for overlooking the socio-political situation at hand, and they challenged the churches to be involved in social and political matters. Minjung theology emerged from this and attracted numerous Christians who were seeking to be involved in the socio-political sphere. The theology became especially popular among liberal theologians. Liberalism influenced various Korean pastors and teachers, and it eventually caused
a schism in the Korean church. The left wing denied the historicity of scripture and other traditional confessions (i.e., the immaculate birth of Christ, miracles and etc.) and their teachings became non-evangelical and moralistic, sounding similar to the teachings of Confucius. For these churches, *Minjung* theology gave a new purpose for their existence, which was to fight for *Minjung*. Through these churches, the story of Jesus was retold through a new perspective of *Minjung*. *Minjung* theology vitalized Liberalism within the Korean churches, and Liberalism in Korea popularized *Minjung* theology.

The scholar Byung-Mu Ahn introduced *Minjung* as a starting point for formulating a theology, later called “*Minjung* theology.” The Korean word “*Minjung*” is a combination of two Chinese characters, 民(min) and 衆(jung). The literal meanings of these characters are, respectively, “people” and “crowd.” The combination of these two characters is used by *Minjung* theologians to designate poor, oppressed and deprived people.¹ Ahn equates *Minjung* and ὄχλος (ochlos) of the book of Mark. According to Ahn, “ochlos of the book of Mark was socially and financially unstable people, and the established powers condemned and alienated them; sinners, tax-collectors, prostitutes and infirmed people are categorized as *ochlos* in the book of Mark.”² For Ahn, *Minjung* is 20th century *ochlos*, and *ochlos* is 1st century *Minjung*. These two words are interchangeable in his work. He formulated a new interpretation through *sitz im leben of ochlos* and setting of life of *Minjung*. He states, “It is observed that *Minjung* of Jesus had never distinguished ‘I’ from ‘Jesus’…. They were not observers of Jesus, but they were participants…. They were not teachers about Jesus, but they were followers (*Der Nachfolge*). They were

imitators of Jesus (imitatio Christi), and they were witnesses (martyr).”

Minjung, and Ahn reconstructed the life of Jesus through this new starting point of Minjung. The first part of this paper draws from the theology of the work of Christ and the soteriology found in Ahn’s work and argues that Ahn’s doctrine of the work of Christ leads to apostasy.

“Apostasy” is labeled to a person who has departed from the genuine faith. According to Apostle Paul, “…in later times some will depart from the faith by devoting themselves to deceitful spirits and teachings of demons” (1 Tim 4:1). In this verse, the content of faith is the gospel, which has the power to save sinners. Paul claimed himself to be “the worst” (1 Tim 1:15). Paul was not poor, oppressed or exploited, so the word “sinner” was used in the spiritual sense. Therefore, the work of Jesus should be understood in the spiritual sense - along with the truth of liberation in Paul’s theology. Ahn, however, denies the spiritual sense of “sinner,” “the work of Jesus” and “liberation” but rather defines them in the socio-political sense. In order to establish his doctrine as biblical, Ahn first attacks the credibility of the Pauline Epistles.

**The Pauline Epistles**

Ahn argues that Paul’s interpretation of the work of Jesus is obscured by his personal objectives, which are to: 1) liberate Christianity from the ghetto of Judaism without separating them, 2) contextualize Christianity in Hellenistic culture, 3) institutionalize the church, and 4) formulate a new mission strategy. Concerning the second objective, Ahn says that the “Christology and Soteriology [of Paul] were formulated through the popular Hellenistic culture

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3 Byung M. Ahn, *Jesus of Galileea* (Seoul: Korea Theological Study Institute, 1998), 12.
4 This paper uses the ESV Bible.
[ideology] of his day, namely Gnostic cosmology.”6 Ahn argues that Paul integrated Gnosticism with Christology. Gnostics were dualists who bifurcated matter and spirit, calling matter evil and spirit good. Thus, the incarnation and the death of Jesus are events that are inconsistent with Gnostic ideology. Ahn argues that Paul intentionally excluded the historical account of Jesus because his target audience was the elite who were educated in Greek philosophy. Integrating Gnosticism was inevitable for Paul to accomplish his objectives.

Ahn’s assessment poses a problem. The ideology behind the Pauline Epistles is contrary to Gnosticism. Although Paul excluded the historical account of Jesus, he mentioned the incarnation and the death of Jesus in his letters (Phil 2:6-8; 1 Thess 5:10). Furthermore, Paul instructed the church to “cleanse ourselves from every defilement of body and spirit, bringing holiness to completion in the fear of God…” (2 Cor 7:1). The concept of the spirit being defiled and the body being cleansed are contrary to Gnosticism, as in Gnosticism matter (the body) is inherently evil and the spirit is inherently good. Also, in 1 Corinthians 15:53, bodily resurrection is mentioned. Therefore, Ahn’s assessment of Paul is inaccurate. Ahn’s assessment comes from a presumption based on Paul’s background and the context of his letters rather than the text of the letters. Paul’s Christology is based on the historical event of Jesus. Moreover, Apostle Peter affirmed the authority of Paul’s doctrine by writing, “…just as our dear brother Paul also wrote you with the wisdom that God gave him” (2 Pet 3:15). Peter pointed out that the source of Paul’s writing is divine. Therefore, the Pauline Epistles are a reliable source for formulating Christology.

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6 Ibid., 155
Now, this paper will compare and contrast Minjung theology and Reformed theology concerning their doctrines on the work of Christ with a focus on soteriology. Reformed theology was chosen to be a dialogue partner with Minjung theology because soteriology was refined and articulated during the time of the Reformation.

The Death of Christ

Minjung soteriology and Reformed soteriology differ in a spiritual versus socio-political sense. They both use the same language of liberation. According to Ahn, Jesus entered Jerusalem for the purpose of overthrowing the authorities to free Minjung from their physical bondage. Jesus strategically chose the Passover as their day of liberation. The Passover was an appropriate day as it was the day that Moses liberated the socio-politically oppressed people of Israel. According to Ahn, this was evidence that Jesus’ effort for liberation was a socio-political effort. Unlike Moses, Jesus failed to free the oppressed, and he died on the cross. Reformed theology agrees that there is a parallel between Jesus and Moses, and the Bible also draws a connection between the Passover and Jesus (John 1:29, 1 Cor 5:7). The connection, however, is spiritual rather than physical. Paul wrote that the Christian’s battle is not against flesh and blood but against what is spiritual (Eph 6:12). In 1 Corinthians 10:2, Paul reinterpreted the exodus event as a spiritual event. The writer of Hebrews interpreted the account of Moses as a type of Christ. The account of Moses did not inspire Jesus, but the account is prophecy concerning the ultimate spiritual liberator who succeeded. The difference in the sense of the words determines the interpretation.

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7 Ahn, Jesus of Galilea, 264-265.
Minjung theologians’ ignorance is not a new trend. Various Israelites also misinterpreted Jesus’ actions and teachings by understanding them socio-politically. In Mark 10:37, the mother of John and James imagined the kingdom to be a political reality. In John 6:14-15, people forced to crown Jesus as a king over a physical dominion. In John 18:36, Jesus explicitly said that His kingdom is not of this world. It is clear from these passages that Jesus did not come to establish an earthly kingdom by overthrowing the government. People of Jesus’ day and our day have misunderstood his work. The gospels present these people as blind because they see the spiritual reality but fail to recognize it. After hearing and witnessing Jesus’ miraculous deeds, Herod thought that John the Baptist resurrected from the dead (Mark 6:16). Some people were clueless, saying “Who is this?” (Mark 4:41). Still others thought of him as “Elijah” or “a Prophet of the old” (Mark 6:15, 8:18). These biblical passages warn against a socio-political interpretation of the work of Jesus, but Minjung theologians ignore them.

From the perspective of the spiritual sense, the death of Jesus is not a failure, but a success. Ahn says that the passion narratives in the gospels depict Jesus as an impotent man.\(^8\) This socio-political interpretation leads Ahn to see Jesus’ death as a mark of failure. It is true that Christ’s suffering is depicted in such a way, but prophecies already predicted the event – especially Isaiah 53. The Apostle Paul and others interpreted the death of Christ by discussing the passion against the backdrop of the prophecies of the Old Testament. Furthermore, Jesus said, “It is finished” (John 19:30) and the verb τελων denotes “bringing an activity to a successful finish” (L&N). The Book of Hebrews also interprets the work of Christ as a once-for-all atoning sacrifice (Heb 7:27, 9:12, 9:26, 10:10). The whole New Testament teaches that Christ

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\(^8\) Ahn, “The Essence of History”, 182
successfully completed redemption through his substitutionary death on the cross. The writers of the New Testament were able to draw such conclusion, because they realized the spiritual reality behind Jesus’ work.

*Minjung* theology deviates from the traditional understanding of the death of Christ. According to Yong-Hwa Na, “Ahn denounced substitutionary death, which depicts God as a God thirsty for blood from the point of the category of law and sacrifice.” For Ahn, the Reformed doctrine of atonement depicts God as blood-thirsty, which is blasphemy. So Ahn maintained his position that Jesus died as a political martyr rather than as a sacrifice. Another reason that Ahn denounced the doctrine of atonement is that he considered *Minjung* as naïve, innocent, and long-suffering.

Reformed soteriology starts with total depravity. However, Ahn argues that *Minjung* are “innocent and pure” and also “naïve, innocent and long-suffering.” Although Arminians are considered to be on the other side of the spectrum in terms of soteriology, they also agree upon depravity. Their disagreement is over the measure of depravity (total or partial). Thus they both taught the necessity of atonement (whether limited or universal) for salvation. When the depravity of man is considered, eternal death is the inevitable consequence. Thus, for salvation, Jesus’ substitutionary death is necessary. This is a cardinal understanding of the church. Westminster Confession of Faith 11.3 states, “Christ, by His obedience and death, did fully discharge the debt all those that are thus justified, and did make a proper, real, and full satisfaction to His father’s justice in their behalf.” Apostle Paul also said that “while we were

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9 Yong W. Na, “A Theological Assessment of Minjung Theology, Systematically and Biblically” (Th.D. diss., Concordia Seminary, 1988), 162.
11 Ibid. 252.
still sinners, Christ died for us” (Rom 5:8). A Minjung theologian’s position concerning the depravity of Minjung is hard to maintain especially when Jesus often mentioned that he came for sinners, not for the “innocent.”

Ahn redefines the term “sinner” to maintain his position. According to Ahn, the term “sinner” in the New Testament denotes a class of people rather than a transgressor of the law. Ahn points out that hamaltolos has two possible meanings: 1) a transgressor of the law, or 2) a person of unethical conduct (based on overblown ceremonial cleansing law) or disgraceful occupation. In the Old Testament, God blessed or punished people based on performance, and prosperity was a sign of blessing. Minjung theologians argue that Pharisees and other oppressors labeled lower-class people as sinners because they were poor - which was a sign of God’s curse - and because they were not able to strictly follow the Pharisaic regulations due to their occupation. According to Nam-Dong Suh, “Oppressors labeled oppressed as sinners.” Minjung are sinners by label, not by essence; the term “sinner” was a derogatory term that was used to alienate and marginalize Minjung. With this new understanding, sin lost its spiritual sense. Therefore, the remedy of sin is to remove the oppressor, and Jesus came for this purpose for “sinners,” or Minjung. By framing sin in the socio-political sphere, the work of Jesus became a political movement.

The primary usage of the word “sin” is spiritual rather than socio-political. In Genesis 3, Adam and Eve were not removed from Eden for oppressing the serpent. Rather, the penalty was due to sin - disobedience of God’s commandment. In the Old Testament, the Israelites failed to

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12 Ahn, “Jesus and Ochlos,” 92.
13 Ibid., 92-93.
14 Nam D. Suh, “Image of Han and the Examination of Its Theology” in Minjung and Korean Theology (Seoul, Korea: Korea Theological Study Institute, 1985), 344.
build a kingdom because they sinned against God. Minjung theologians point out that the Israelites sinned by oppressing others (widows and orphans), and that this was the main cause for their exile. If their interpretation is correct, then God should have spared the lives of the oppressed when Jerusalem was destroyed. Furthermore, numerous passages of the Bible use the word “forgive” to resolve sin, and the whole sacrificial system was instituted as a remedy for sin. When all the scriptural evidences are accounted for the study of the word “sin,” Ahn’s redefinition of the word is inconsistent with Scripture.

An Unnecessary Yet Meaningful Death and Resurrection

Ahn argues that while the death of Christ was a failure, it carried a strong message. He states, “Although the Jesus movement failed, we can learn something from Jesus’ perfect denial of the system of Jerusalem, which caused his death.”15 Jesus was remembered as a victim and a political martyr who passionately tried to bring change. Jesus is viewed as a symbol of Minjung and an example to fight like him. According to Ahn, “Mark saw the fate of Minjung through Him [Jesus]… the crucifixion of Christ is replayed through the life of Minjung of Galilee.”16 Ahn argues that the gospel of Mark was written around the fall of Jerusalem (70 AD), and that the purpose of the gospel was to justify revolutionary movements.17 Although the death of Jesus was a failure, it still carried an important message that provided justification for political movement. Michael Horton distinguishes the ontological and ethical-covenantal approach to understanding the sacrificial atonement. Various ethical-covenantal approaches discount the purpose of Christ’s

17 Ahn “The Essence of History”, 169-171. He surveys various rebellious movements from Gamala Judas to Zealot’s burning of Agrippa’s castle.
death. Minjung theologians approach the death in an ethical-covenantal manner. Minjung theologians understand that the death of Christ was a personal dedication for a greater cause. The message of death is useful, for it motivates people to fight for their liberation. This approach limits them to see Christ’s death only as a mere display of an example to imitate. In doing so, they lost the inestimable value of His death.

Reformed theology approaches the death of Christ from the truth of God’s justice and love. God is just, and “he who justifies the wicked…[is]…an abomination to God” (Prov 17:15). If wicked people are justified without penalty, it is an abomination to God because God is just. Thus, he commands Israelites to judge without partiality (Deut 16:19). Justice is one of God’s attributes. Divine justice requires to put a sinner to death (Rom. 6:23). But out of love, God planned to give a substitute who would take a sinner’s place. Berkhof concluded by saying, “The veracity of God demanded that the penalty should be executed, and if sinners were to be saved, should be executed in the life of a substitute.”19 The Old Testament sacrificial system was imperfect, but it only anticipated the perfect sacrifice of Jesus Christ. Although it was imperfect, the sacrificial system provided an important teaching concerning substitutionary atonement. Ultimately, it was fulfilled through the death of Christ, which satisfied divine justice. As a result, divine love and justice were displayed through the cross.

The Resurrection of Jesus

Another feature of Minjung theology is rationalism. Ahn laid down the presupposition that “theology is anthropology… third, faith does not demand reason to be sacrificed. Fourth,…

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the content of faith must be accompanied by understanding…” The implication of the phrase “theology is anthropology” is that the purpose of doing theology is for the people, and so the starting point of theology should be people. With this presupposition, Ahn chose Minjung as his starting point. Looking at his third and fourth presuppositions, it is safe to assume that his German theological background influenced him to be a rationalist. As a rationalist, it was natural for him to choose people and their context rather than God and His revelation as a starting point. For a rationalist, phenomenon is the only way to access and know reality. Ahn himself rejected the neo-orthodox theologian Bultmann, and he accepted higher criticism. In this theological and philosophical framework, the divine is unknowable noumenon, so the divinity of Jesus is inconsistent with the system. The rationalistic tendency and meaninglessness of Jesus’ death led Ahn to abandon the divinity of Jesus along with the bodily resurrection of Jesus.

Although Minjung theology denied the historicity of the resurrection, the message of Easter is still important for Minjung. Ahn says that Jesus cannot die, for His death is death of Minjung. He sees Jesus as a concept rather than as a historical figure. The message of resurrection gives hope to the oppressed who are fighting for their liberation. Ahn quotes the words of an angel concerning Jesus: “Tell his [Jesus’] disciples and Peter that he is going before you to Galilee.” Ahn interprets this to mean that Jesus was not literally going before them to Galilee. Ahn points out how the more accurate record of Jesus, the book of Mark, does not include the disciples’ encounter with Jesus. Going to Galilee meant that the story of liberation must continue through the lives of the oppressed. For this reason, Galilee is used as a symbolic city where oppressed people lived. After the death of Jesus, Jesus was resurrected, not literally,

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20 Ahn, Jesus of Galilea, 11.
but through the struggles of oppressed people. In the first century, the message of Easter motivated the Galileans (the twelve disciples and others) to struggle for liberation. *Minjung* is the 20th century version of the resurrected Jesus. It is a romantic ending of the historical Jesus. But the divinity of Jesus and his historical resurrection are completely denied.

**Conclusion**

The substitutionary atonement of Jesus and His bodily resurrection are two doctrines that the Apostles and the early church fathers kept with their lives. But *Minjung* theologians consider them unnecessary. Ahn tried to draw the life of Jesus, but it became a self-portrait of Ahn, who fought for *Minjung* rather than for what the church fought for throughout the centuries. Ahn and various other classic liberal theologians have tried to draw the historical Jesus, but all their portraits of Jesus resembled themselves. J. G. Machen was right when he pointed out that liberalism is not Christianity.21 *Minjung* theology departs from true Christian doctrine. In borrowing Apostle Paul’s words, *Minjung* theology comes from deceitful spirits and demons; it is not of Christ.

The deviation started when they thought that theology was anthropology and when they started their theology from *Minjung*. To justify their position, they reinterpreted the work of Jesus from a purely socio-political perspective. In order to suppress the spiritual sense of salvation, they redefined the common term of “sin” and discredited Apostle Paul’s teaching and non-Markan gospels under the name of source criticism. On the other hand, they credited the unknown source Q and elevated the apocrypha and writings of *Josephus*. Their sources for

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reconstructing a historical Jesus were subjective, and they placed *Minjung* as the canon for determining the authenticity and credibility of the sources. Based on their illegitimate methods of research, they seriously perverted the doctrine of Christ and became apostate from faith in the gospel of Jesus.
Part II

Introduction

Minjung theology lost popularity as Korea became more stabilized politically and economically. It seems that Minjung won the battle for liberation. Although there are minor degrees of injustice and poverty, the majority of Minjung is living under prosperity. Minjung’s major task is finished; Minjung theologians are expected to rest their case against established powers. Kwon, however, recently published a systematic theology of Minjung, in order to continue developing Minjung theology. The justification comes from his philosophy on theological research. He writes, "[The purpose of] Theology, especially Minjung theology is giving life to those who are perishing under the errors of a new free capitalistic structure."22 Moreover, he believes that the theological task increases the fruitfulness of humanity and all creatures as they live together.23 This opens the possibility of continuing the engagement of social justice and ecological preservation. This new engagement requires a modification of the traditional form of Minjung theology.

Kwon introduces three new perspectives for the new direction of Minjung theology. First, "Minjung theology presupposes the situation of Asia and the third world countries."24 This implies that the current situation of Korea is no longer in need of Minjung theology, but they can provide a model for other Asian countries. Second, the book incorporates traditional Christianity into Minjung theology in order to challenge established churches to participate in social justice.

23 Ibid.
24 Ibid., 10.
Thirdly, the book incorporates non-Christian religious resources and ideologies. Kwon justified such usage by contending that western theology is shaped by western philosophy; thus, it is fitting for an Asian theology to use eastern religious and philosophical resources (texts of Buddhist, Confucius and etc.).

The new perspective on *Minjung* theology is contextualization of its original formulation. The new perspective maintains the foundation of *Minjung*, which include the historical Jesus and the socio-political concept of sin and liberation. Then, it contextualizes *Minjung* theology for the contemporary realm. Concerning the contemporary church context, every Christian church found its legitimacy in the Scripture and the early church traditional. The new perspective on *Minjung* theology incorporates traditional doctrines (i.e. Trinity), but chooses an option that would provide a proper platform for *Minjung* theology (i.e. social Trinity by Moltmann). Concerning non-biblical resources, Kwon tries to find common denominators between *Minjung* theology and other religious traditions in order to engage the greater number of people in Asia. These interactions further pervert the true gospel of Christ.

The second part of this paper will involve the discussion of engagement with traditional Christianity and will use a type of canonical approach. Vanhoozer's drama of redemption model is fitting for a canonical approach to *Minjung* theology. The second part of this paper plans to evaluate the outcomes from the development. The second part of this paper contends that the fruit of *Minjung* theology provide more evidence that *Minjung* theology is a perversion of the gospel that only drifts further away from true Christianity.

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25 Kwon writes, "*Minjung* theology resides in the tradition of Christianity, so it utilizes the scripture as the most important theology." in Kwon, Jesus, 10. Here, the mention of scripture and tradition is clear indication that he intends to approach the topic with a canonical approach.
Applying The Drama of Redemption to Minjung Theology

Minjung theologians understand scripture as stories of oppressed people fighting for liberation. This story was told through the history of Israel, which was an oppressed nation. The story began with their slavery under Egypt and ended with slavery under Rome. The story climaxed at the ministry of Jesus. Although Jesus failed to liberate his people according to Minjung theologians, the cross sparked a new movement of liberation. This story of struggle for liberation never dies out, and according to Minjung theology, the resurrection is the symbol of unceasing struggle for liberation. Israelis’ struggle is scripted in the Scripture, and Minjung (oppressed people) are called to use the script to improvise in their particular context. The former Minjung theologians used the script and improvised in the context of 1970 Korea, and the new wave of Minjung theology tried to use the same script and improvised in a different context. Hence, the drama of redemption model is fitting tool to understand the development of Minjung theology.

The drama of redemption model attends both the drama in the text and the drama that continues in the church. The drama in the text plays God’s redeeming act in Christ through the Spirit to the world. The economy of trinity is displayed through the drama of redemption. That drama has continued in the church. Minjung theology agrees that the story must continue based on the script, but the major difference is the meaning of redemption. Traditional Christianity commonly professes that redemption is spiritual, but Minjung theology thinks of it as socio-political liberation. Ultimately, they might have the same script, but their understanding of the

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26 In Kevin Vanhoozer, The Drama of Doctrine: A Canonical Linguistic Approach to Christian Theology (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005), 17. He writes “ Canonical-linguistic theology attends both to the drama in the text – what God is doing in the world through Christ – and to the drama that continues in the church as God uses Scripture to address, edify, and confront its readers.”
script differs. This difference produces a different image of the church. Using the drama analogy, the church is called to improvise that which is fitting to its characteristic, and the characteristic of the church is described in the written part of the drama. If a church mischaracterizes its character, their improvisation would not be fitting. Therefore, the identity of the church is a crucial factor.

The church bears the testimony of Christ that is the mark and mission of the church. The church testifies Christ through proclamation and action, so it concerns her teaching and practice (Phil 1:27). The testimony of Christ is called the gospel. The church is endowed with the gospel for the purpose of keeping and spreading it (2 Tim 2:2). The gospel also defines the identity of the church. The identity of the church can be found in her relationship to God, and the nature of the relationship can be seen through God’s definitive word/act. Paul Ricour mentions two types of identity – idem and ipse. According to Vanhoozer, borrowing from Ricour, "Idem-identity encourages uncritical, uninformative, and unimaginative repetition of the past."  

The gospel message was variously presented in Acts. Paul quoted a Greek poet or an Old Testament reference depending on his audience’s context. Four gospels presented the gospel from four different perspectives. Evangelical practices also varied; some ate pork for the sake of the gospel while others did not eat for the sake of the gospel. These evidences show that the practice of the church is not uncritical, uninformative, and unimaginative repetition of the past. Therefore, the idem-identity does not properly describe the identity of church.

**Iipse-identity**, on the other hand, is described as "soft" identity, which properly describe the church's identity.  

Although the gospel was presented in various forms and the practices of the church were not uniform, there was a certain consistency. Concerning the eating meat, for

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27 Vanhoozer, *Four Views*, 127.
28 Ibid.
example, the gospel tells us that the Lord gave up His right for others (Phil 2:5-8). The identity of the church is found in the gospel, the message of Christ, who gave up their right for others, and this identity will cause the church to decide upon the meat eating issue based on church’s identity. According to Vanhoozer, "The church cannot rest content with identical repetitions. The church is not called to play the same scene over and over but to take the gospel into new situations." Hence, improvisation properly describes the practice of the church.

Improvisation is a noun form of the verb improvise, which is defined as "to make or create (something) by using whatever is available". As the meaning indicates, it uses whatever is available. It does not create ex nihilo. Normally, improvisation is used in musical or dramatic composition. In terms of music, improvisation is not a genesis of musical notations, but it requires skills and musical talents to make a good musical improvisation. When certain rules (i.e. chord progression and scales) and expressions (i.e. dynamic and tempo) are ignored, the improvisation might ruin the whole composition. Likewise, there are certain rules to improvise the drama in the text in the life of the church. Some of these rules are prescribed, but the most are given through the narratives in the text.

The church has a unique identity, and the church should act in accordance with this identity. As the paper mentioned earlier, Minjung theology’s ideology (or teachings) of church differs from that of traditional Christianity. In their opinion, modernism provided two options for the church: the historical Jesus and the Christ of confession. Minjung theology claims that the numerous established churches chose the Christ of confession. However, it was a wrong option,

29 Ibid., 128.
30 Merriam-Webster online dictionary.
31 Vanhoozer also wrote "Improvisation should not be equated with sheer novelty or with simply being original; on the contrary, improvisation depends on training, narrative skills, and a sense for what is appropriate to say and do in a given situation" in Vanhoozer, The Drama, 128.
because only the historical Jesus portrayed the reality. Furthermore, if theology was for people, it should start from the oppressed people. From the starting point of the oppressed people, *Minjung* theology identified the church, and this identity was the *Gestalt* of Christ. According to Kwon,

> The church is called the body of Christ. The body refers to the system or structure of the church. This is external form. This form has the shape of Christ. The spirit of the church is Christ. The external form of the church's life should display the spirit, namely the form of Christ. Therefore, reviving the spirit of Christ is having the gestalt or the form of Christ.

The identity of the church is displaying the form of Christ (*Gestalt*), and this form is found in the story of Jesus and the historical context that influenced Jesus, which includes the Jewish temple system, the Roman Empire and others. From this historical investigation, the form of Christ emerges, which becomes the identity of the church. *Minjung* theology formulates ethics that are consistent with the new identity of the church.

**Improvisation and Fruits of the Minjung**

Christian ethics, borrowing from the drama of redemption model, is making a proper improvisation that fits the character of the gospel, which is the message of Jesus. *Minjung* theology also echoes this proposition, for their goal of ethics is also following the pattern of Jesus. *Minjung* theology, however, differs from traditional Christianity, for they define the character of Jesus differently. Kwon also used the language of improvisation, saying, "We do not erroneously repeat the form of Christ or Gestalt of Jesus literally in our situation, but creatively..."
[follow] the life of Jesus..." The outcome (or fruits) of their improvisation also differs from that of traditional Christianity.

Faith and repentance are considered as the primary fruits in a Christian life. The act of repentance differs in their doctrine. Repentance means turning away from one’s former life and walking on the path of righteousness that is described in scripture. This is a first step for Christian living, which sets the standard for Christian ethics. Repentance is effective in the life of a Christian, because of the finished work of Jesus and the Holy Spirit that applies the merits of Jesus Christ. In this process, the act of repentance is played out everywhere the gospel is preached. Although the form of repentance might be different from place to place, the central piece remains the same, which includes the free offer of forgiveness and life on the basis of the finished work of Jesus. The church grants or reinstates membership based on one’s repentance and faith; these fruits are consistent with the identity of the church. Minjung, on the other hand, has a different identity. They draw their identity from the form of Christ as liberator. This identity produces a different type of repentance.

Minjung theology’s definition of repentance is primarily horizontal, not vertical. In other words, repentance mainly involves reconciliation with neighbors. Reconciliation with neighbors and reconciliation with God are one action. If a sinner reconciles with their neighbor, the reconciliation with God is implied in the action. Since Minjung theology defines sin in a socio-political sense, it emphasizes the evil that comes from a structure. Repentance therefore means turning away from insensitivity about social justice and participating in social justice work.\textsuperscript{35} Such an understanding is fitting for Minjung theology. The identity of the church is the form of

\textsuperscript{34} Ibid., 204.
\textsuperscript{35} Ibid., 183.
Jesus, the liberator, and the church should improvise in a particular situation in accordance to the script of liberation. Thus, repentance is turning away from an indifference about liberation. This understanding of the fruit of repentance shows how an alternative gospel produces alternative fruits.

Every religious tradition arose to answer the problem of evil, but they differed in the cause of evil in this world. Buddhism, for example, says that the evil comes from dissatisfaction about life, and the dissatisfaction comes from craving; thus, the remedy is ceasing of craving, which can be achieve through rigorous discipline. Christianity is unique, for it teaches that the problem of evil is sin in a spiritual sense, which means rebellion against God. The only remedy is Jesus' substitutionary atonement, which can reconcile the relationship between God and His people. Minjung theology has no reason to maintain the doctrine of substitutionary atonement, because their repentance does not deal with God. Hence, Kwon rejects the doctrine of substitutionary atonement. Since the core and unique doctrine of Christianity is absent, Minjung theology leads to transcendental Christianity.

Transcendental Christianity is a theological improvisation of Minjung theology in a new situation: postmodern and religious pluralism. Kwon asks a rhetorical question concerning other religions, saying, "Does the form of Christ exist in other religion?" He opens the possibility that there are followers of the form of Christ in other religions. The Gestalt of Christ is found in other religions because the story of Minjung's struggle is universal. Christ and his struggle is an

37 Ibid., 173.
38 Ibid., 204.
39 Ibid., 204.
The archetype of Minjung and their struggle.⁴⁰ This type of act becomes a bridge between Christianity and other religious traditions. In Korean history, it was found in Dong-Hak.⁴¹ Here, they also founded teachings concerning the spirit and the will of heaven. This teaching influenced various servant classes to revolt against the upper class in the 18th Century. This particular piece of Korean history is a type of Christ's struggle, and Kwon even labels it as sacramental. Furthermore, Minjung theology equates this history as a moving of the spirit.

The role of the spirit is very peculiar in Minjung theology. They define the spirit as the power and energy of God, and say that the spirit "worked with the prophets and Jesus to change the course of human history. Now, for the purpose of justice, the oppressed minjung, by the help of the spirit, leads the ministry of liberation."⁴² History and the spirit go hand in hand in the scheme of Minjung theology. For this reason, they subscribe to open theism, and the spirit serves as the dynamic force between God and humanity. Open theism is fitting for Minjung theology. The spirit moves history as it creates liberation and life. Traditional Christianity understood the role of the Spirit in life-making on the basis of the finished work of Jesus, but Minjung theology understood the role of the spirit in life-making in the struggle of Minjung. Christ is simply an ultimate model for this struggle.

It seems that Christ is unnecessary in Minjung theology. Gautama of Buddhism or even Gandhi can be qualified as the ultimate model that can replace Jesus. Minjung theology would not go to that extreme, but they would refrain from saying that Jesus’ ministry is wholly different from others, while agreeing that Jesus is just better than other heroes in history. Traditional

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⁴⁰ Ibid., 50.
⁴¹ The basic ideology behind Dong-Hak is that there is the ultimate will of heaven, and the world-spirit moves the history according to the will.
⁴² Ibid., 49.
Christianity confesses that the ministry of Jesus is unique and it cannot and should not be repeated (Heb 9:26). *Minjung* theology would deny this, for similar sacrifices have been repeated throughout human history. Eventually, the content of their church ministry differs from what the church has been doing. In sum, *Minjung* does not need the unique ministry of Jesus, and they deny the atonement of Christ. The unique identity of Christianity is lost with this rejection.

**Conclusion**

The second part of this paper demonstrates that the altered gospel cannot produce genuine fruits. *Minjung* theology throws away the gospel along with the identity of true Christianity. In the recent work of Kwon, he tried to find legitimacy for *Minjung* theology, but it only proves that *Minjung* theology is something other than Christianity. The work failed to demonstrate that *Minjung* is a part of a long tradition of Christianity. Jesus taught His disciples that "you will recognize them [false teachers] by their fruits" (Matt. 7:20). *Minjung* theology's fruits of repentance and devaluing of the importance of Jesus' atoning work prove that they are false teachers. They are not only followers of perversion, but leaders of it.
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