

## **The Crisis of Evangelicalism and Public Theology**

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### **Introduction**

As a theologian and a pastor, I can't help but feel frustrated with the reality of today's Christianity; it is no longer new to hear that more and more seminaries and churches are struggling with serious (financial) difficulties, as many people are leaving. In this, I pay special attention to the so-called crisis of evangelicalism, because many Asian American believers—especially Korean American Christians like me—are believed to be under the influence of such evangelicalism.<sup>1</sup>

In 2016, 62% of evangelical Protestants were at least 50 years old, while fewer than half (46%) fell in that age group in 1987.<sup>2</sup> Even though this statistic pertains to white evangelicals, in my experience, the situations of Korean immigrant churches are not very different. This means that most churches are getting older and young people are leaving evangelical Christianity. Soong-Chan Rah rightly identifies the problem as the captivity of white evangelicalism. He highlights the revival of multicultural evangelicalism, saying that “by 2050, African, Asian and Latin American Christians will constitute 71 percent of the world's Christian population.”<sup>3</sup> However, an additional problem is that evangelicalism itself, as a way of theological application, might not be working for younger generation regardless of race, due to its inadequacy in the secular era. Mark Labberton regards this as ‘the crisis of evangelicalism,’ a crisis wherein the gospel of Jesus Christ has been betrayed and shamed by an evangelicalism that has violated its own moral and spiritual integrity.<sup>4</sup>

I don't think that such a crisis has resulted from some ethical scandal of evangelical churches or pastors; rather, it is a matter of theological essence. Today's crisis of evangelicalism is based on its dichotomous worldview that regards the church as holy and the world as corrupt, as it were. Against this backdrop, this article intends to envision a post-evangelicalism, supported by the idea of public theology as a key to reconstructing theological methods. Due to my limited experiences, I will focus mainly on the contexts of Korean (American) evangelicalism, but I hope some of these observations can help other believers from various backgrounds better understand their own churches and ministries.

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<sup>1</sup> According to a study from the Pew Research Center in 2012, Korean Americans (and approximately 10% of all Asian Americans) are mostly Protestant (61%), which is a very high number compared to other Asian Americans. This is because many Korean Americans (68%) are more likely to have a literal view of the Bible. Pew Research Center, *Asian Americans: A Mosaic of Faiths*, <https://www.pewforum.org/2012/07/19/asian-americans-a-mosaic-of-faiths-overview/> (accessed Apr 16, 2021)

<sup>2</sup> Daniel Cox, “Are White Evangelicals Sacrificing The Future In Search Of The Past?” <https://fivethirtyeight.com/features/are-white-evangelicals-sacrificing-the-future-in-search-of-the-past/> (accessed Apr 16, 2021)

<sup>3</sup> Soong-Chan Rah, *The Next Evangelicalism: Freeing the Church from Western Cultural Captivity* (Downers Grove, IVP Books, 2009), 14.

<sup>4</sup> Mark Labberton, *Political Dealing: The Crisis of Evangelicalism*, <https://www.fuller.edu/posts/political-dealing-the-crisis-of-evangelicalism/> (accessed Apr 16, 2021)

## **The Crisis of White Evangelicalism**

In his book *After Evangelicalism: The Path to a New Christianity*, the renowned Christian ethicist David Gushee argues that “for a long time, US evangelicals comforted themselves with belief in their immunity from the overall Christian decline... but now... Evangelicals are experiencing the same downward trend.”<sup>5</sup> In this, the matter of authority has played a key role in the crisis of white evangelicalism. For evangelicals who strongly believe in Biblicism—the authority of the Bible—and crucicentrism—the centrality of the redemptive work of Jesus Christ—their authority has to do with the essence of their identity.<sup>6</sup> However, in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, 9/11 became a symbolic event that undermined their authority on a national level, which left them with indelible scars, wounds, and, importantly, fear; that fear became the most effective avenue into gaining ground with evangelicals’ political involvement. Consequently, many evangelicals tended to identify evil with terrorists, to suggest that terrorists are evil, and to argue that evil must be destroyed by any means necessary. The demonization of terrorists is not limited to the direct perpetrators of the evil act itself; rather, the net is cast wide and covers all those whose sins have incurred the wrath of God. In a way, the terrorists were almost viewed as messengers of God’s disgust with American sin.<sup>7</sup>

Almost 80 percent of white evangelicals support President Trump because they perceive him to be a political messiah who will restore their impaired authority at the individual, social, and national levels. This is a sociopolitical phenomenon in the USA that goes far beyond the basic doctrine that conservative evangelical convictions are close to those of the political right. As a result, they began to be authoritarians deprived of authority. In other words, some white evangelicals have tended to engage with social agendas including political, economic, and racial issues, with a more coercive attitude. Their core motive might be understandable, but it carries with it a potential insatiability, and the danger is that “the vengeful motive often leads people to exact more than necessary, to be maliciously spiteful or dangerously aggressive, or to become hateful themselves by committing the reciprocal act of violence.”<sup>8</sup> In this, the violence on Capitol Hill earlier this year posed serious questions to both American citizens as a whole and to evangelicals about the worst-case scenario of violent extremism based on political partisanship.

From the Asian American perspective, the more serious threat is racist violence, which is largely attributed to white supremacy. In 2020, throughout the Covid-19 pandemic, anti-Asian hate crimes increased by nearly 150%. The crime of shooting and killing six Asian people near Atlanta was one of the most tragic events. Surprisingly, the perpetrator was known as a typical Southern evangelical, grounded in a sincere Christian faith. According to Robert Jones, white evangelicals (mostly in the South) have serious racist tendencies. Jones provides several forms of data and statistics, including a racial index, which showed that white evangelical Protestants

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<sup>5</sup> David P. Gushee, *After Evangelicalism: The Path to a New Christianity* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2020), 2.

<sup>6</sup> Following David Bebbington’s research, National Association of Evangelicals, an association of evangelical denominations, organizations, schools, churches and individuals, defines evangelicalism as four primary characteristics: conversionism, activism, Biblicism, crucicentrism. <https://www.nae.net/what-is-an-evangelical/> (accessed Apr 16, 2021)

<sup>7</sup> Jerry Falwell explains, “As terrible as 9/11 was, it could be minuscule, if, in fact . . . God continues to lift the curtain and allow the enemies of America to give us probably what we deserve.” William J. Crotty, *The Politics of Terror: The U.S. Response to 9/11* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 2016), 55.

<sup>8</sup> Martha Minow, *Between Vengeance and Forgiveness: Facing History after Genocide and Mass Violence* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1999), 10.

have the highest median score (0.78) compared to other groups, such as white Catholics (0.72), white mainline Protestants (0.69), the general population (0.57), white religiously unaffiliated Americans (0.42), and black Protestants (0.24).<sup>9</sup> Clearly, today's (white) evangelicals are now faced with the danger that many public affairs, political issues, and even deep theological traditions are unwisely reduced to discourses of authoritarianism and nationalism. However, evangelicals should recognize that forms of exclusivism among white evangelicals—such as racism, sexism, and militarism—must fail because they do not mobilize very many people, as a result of their relentless negativity.<sup>10</sup> This is a serious threat to American society as well as a serious problem that can destroy the evangelical church itself.

### **The Crisis of Korean (American) Evangelicalism**

Many Korean immigrant churches have been influenced by South Korean evangelicalism, which is driven by conservative perspectives or the political right. Historically, there are a few reasons for this propensity to conservatism, but most importantly, many Korean churches have tended to be extremely vigilant against communism since the Korean War. In the present day, South Korean society has recently faced a growing politicization of right-wing demonstrators and evangelicals (or fundamentalists) who are called the *taeukgi troop* (they protest by waving *taeukgi*, national flags, as a sign of anti-communism or pro-Americanism). Criticizing the more liberal current government, they have conducted large-scale anti-government protests, giving rise to many people who were confirmed to have caught the coronavirus. As a result, these actions have led many citizens to negatively perceive Christianity as threatening public stability. Two major problems lie at the heart of the matter: that evangelical theology is reduced to a political agenda, and that the church has completely lost its function for the public good. James Davison Hunter makes the point that evangelicals, in their political orientations, have developed an image as “a bastion of unwavering conservatism and fanatical intolerance of cultural diversity,”<sup>11</sup> and Ronald Sider points out that due to the lack of extended and careful reflection on politics, “evangelical political engagement has too often been unbalanced, inconsistent, and ineffective.”<sup>12</sup> The lack of social responsibility based on political conservatism has shaped the identity and ethos of many Korean immigrant churches in a similar way.

Furthermore, a crisis of authority is happening within the church. Modern American society is becoming more and more polarized politically, economically, and culturally; “at the heart of this polarization are controversies around how we as a society should deal with particular social issues such as immigration, same-sex marriage, gun violence, public education, and global warming and their personal, religious, financial, and security implications.”<sup>13</sup> However, many Korean American evangelical churches are not prepared to deal with these public issues. Instead, they simply focus on the ministry of prayer and worship, without freely

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<sup>9</sup> Robert P. Jones, *White Too Long: The Legacy of White Supremacy in American Christianity* (New York, Simon & Schuster, 2020), 132–133.

<sup>10</sup> Ronald J. Sider and Diane Knippers, eds., *Toward an Evangelical Public Policy: Political Strategies for the Health of the Nation* (Grand Rapids, Mich: Baker Books, 2005), 22.

<sup>11</sup> James Davison Hunter, *Evangelicalism: The Coming Generation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 117.

<sup>12</sup> Sider and Knippers, *Toward an Evangelical Public Policy*, 9.

<sup>13</sup> Mark Labberton, *Discerning Ethics: Diverse Christian Responses to Divisive Moral Issues*, ed. Hak Joon Lee and Tim Dearborn (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2020), 1–2.

communicating on such agendas. In this regard, Hak Joon Lee suggests that the Korean church has lost its public spirituality in the following seven aspects: faith for blessing, familism, individual-churchism, the logic of growth and idolatry, dichotomic perspective, belittlement of reason, and oversimple thoughts.<sup>14</sup> The processes of decision-making are limited to pastors and other elders, with the result that the church seems very privatized.

As many churches are not interested in the concrete problems that members of the congregation encounter in their public lives, many young people are leaving to other communities or never coming back to the church.<sup>15</sup> In this way, the crisis of the Korean American evangelical church is rooted in its privatization of church and faith. Against this backdrop, Sung-bihn Yim argues that “to overcome such unprecedented crisis, the Korean church, first of all, must strengthen theological foundation for establishing the church's evangelical identity in a different way to the past.”<sup>16</sup> I argue that public theology can be a key to connecting the church and society.

### **Public Theology in Evangelical Tradition**

Public theology conceptualizes the essence of Christian theology as exploring a way to fulfill the kingdom of God, in which the pursuit of the “common good”<sup>17</sup> is one key process to achieving this among God’s creatures. Public theology not only seeks to use the Bible, tradition, reason, and experience as resources for public engagement but also works to communicate with diverse disciplines and traditions outside Christian theology and discourses, taking an interdisciplinary approach.<sup>18</sup> In particular, Martin Marty’s model of the public church as a communion of communions<sup>19</sup>—in other words, an antithesis of tribalism, privatism, and totalitarianism—encourages Christians to see themselves as responding to calls for public action in various ways. In this sense, public theology can be understood as a theology of communicating with other people in the public sphere in a way that preserves the uniqueness of the Gospel and theological traditions while presenting the truth of Christianity to the public in a reasonable manner.

Some Korean evangelical pastors tend to believe that such suggestions are contrary to their own conservative theology; however, the historical tradition of evangelicalism is well suited to public theology. For instance, American evangelicalism is significant for its breaking away from fundamentalism. The neo-evangelicals argued that traditional beliefs required a greater social engagement on the part of believers, while classic fundamentalism ignored the relevance of the church to social problems. Those neo-evangelicals began to provide a new voice in the public square.<sup>20</sup> Particularly during the 1970s, the civil rights, women’s, environmental,

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<sup>14</sup> Hak Joon Lee, *A Paradigm Shift in Korean Churches* (Seoul: Holy WavePlus Press, 2011), 71–72.

<sup>15</sup> In the Los Angeles area where I live, despite a few successful second generation-centered or multicultural churches, the average age of most traditional and established Korean American churches is rapidly increasing.

<sup>16</sup> Sung-bihn Yim, *Public Theology for Korean Church and Society* (Seoul: Presbyterian University and Theological Seminary Press, 2017), 137.

<sup>17</sup> Andrew Bradstock and Hilary Russell, “Politics, Church, and the Common Good,” in *A Companion to Public Theology*, eds. Sebastian Kim and Katie Day (Leiden: Brill, 2017), 166–167.

<sup>18</sup> John de Gruchy, “Public Theology as Christian Witness: Exploring the Genre,” *International Journal of Public Theology*, 1/1 (2007: 1), 39.

<sup>19</sup> Martin Marty, *The Public Church: Mainline-Evangelical-Catholic* (New York: Crossroad, 1981), 16.

<sup>20</sup> Examples are as follows: the National Association of Evangelicals (NAE), established in Washington, DC, in 1943; the evangelical magazine *Christianity Today*, edited by Carl Henry (in the mid-1950s); the public pronouncements of Billy Graham; and so on.

and anti-war movements allowed the evangelical community to contribute to the appearance of more liberal voices, and the Chicago Declaration was an extraordinary innovation in how evangelicals thought about public engagement.<sup>21</sup>

Abraham Kuyper can be viewed a pivotal figure connecting public theology and Reformed evangelicalism. Kuyper's thoughts have been researched in various fields, including theology, politics, philosophy, ethics, and more; many scholars understand Kuyper as embodying public theology in his own life and thoughts.<sup>22</sup> Among his thoughts and insights in Calvinism, Kuyper's notion of *sphere sovereignty* can be understood as the fundamental idea underlying his other beliefs. Kuyper was more open to seeing *common grace* within each sphere, including culture. Rather than creation in the image of God being limited to individuals, for Kuyper, the entire human race is corporately the bearer of the divine image. Kuyper's idea challenged both conservatives and liberals to collaborate with people from different backgrounds, and this is where public theology can best contribute to the church and to society.

Additionally, one tradition the evangelicalism must consider is the Lausanne Covenant. In July 1974, more than 2700 evangelical leaders from 150 countries gathered together in Lausanne, Switzerland, where global evangelical readers focused on "the question of the proper place of social action in the overall program of the Church".<sup>23</sup> Their thoughtful efforts are well highlighted in Article 5 of *Christian Social Responsibility*:<sup>24</sup>

*We affirm that God is both the Creator and the Judge of all men. We therefore should share his concern for justice and reconciliation throughout human society and for the liberation of men from every kind of oppression. Because mankind is made in the image of God, every person, regardless of race, religion, colour, culture, class, sex or age, has an intrinsic dignity because of which he should be respected and served, not exploited...The salvation we claim should be transforming us in the totality of our personal and social responsibilities. Faith without works is dead.*

By proclaiming and reaffirming the public-engagement tradition of evangelicalism in the 1970s, the Lausanne Covenant has virtually earned canonical status and is the text to which socially-concerned evangelicals of all types repeatedly return to justify their social and political participation. Even though the global evangelical communities still seem to disagree on what kinds of social, economic, and political visions they should collectively espouse or how they could translate those visions into actions in specific local contexts, the *1974 Lausanne Congress* opened a space to shift evangelical attitudes toward the public realm in a very global context.

Therefore, evangelicalism is closely related to public theology in its essence. Evangelicals are neither separatists, like fundamentalists, nor assimilators, like liberals. They are

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<sup>21</sup> The first paragraph of the Chicago Declaration rightly shows the deep reflection for public engagement for evangelicals: "As evangelical Christians committed to the Lord Jesus Christ and the full authority of the Word of God, we affirm that God lays total claim upon the lives of his people. We cannot, therefore, separate our lives from the situation in which God has placed us in the United States and the world."

<sup>22</sup> Vincent E. Bacote, *The Spirit in Public Theology: Appropriating the Legacy of Abraham Kuyper* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005), 53.

<sup>23</sup> James D. Douglas, ed. *Let the Earth Hear His Voice: International Congress on World Evangelization Lausanne*, (Minneapolis: World Wide Publications, 1975), 29.

<sup>24</sup> Lausanne Movement, *The Lausanne Covenant*, <https://www.lausanne.org/content/covenant/lausanne-covenant> (accessed Apr. 16, 2021).

perfectly willing to cooperate with people of other traditions, with whom they do not agree on a number of particulars, without losing their evangelical identity with the gospel. If evangelical churches seriously ponder their own theological traditions—American evangelicalism, Abraham Kuyper, and the Lausanne Covenant—they will realize that one of the important missions of the Church in achieving the kingdom of God is attaining both individual and social salvation within the structure of public theology.

### **Conclusion: Toward a Post-Evangelical Church**

In conclusion, I argue that for the new movement of evangelicalism, the church should pursue the essential concepts of public theology—that is, publicity and openness—as a top priority. In other words, the church should be a community of true fellowship, with horizontal communication and solidarity regardless of age, race, gender, and wealth. In particular, given the reality that cultural polarization is becoming more severe, the first generation of parents in immigrant churches should keep a humble attitude with an understanding heart (1 Kings 3:9) in order to listen to the real sufferings and struggles of their children's generation. Furthermore, evangelical churches must proclaim a new relationship between the church and community, in pursuit of the common good and for the wellbeing of all. Martin Luther King Jr. envisioned this new relationship of companionship in the concept of "the beloved community", and it is also reminiscent of Max Stackhouse's idea that "all areas of life [are] under God, and pose the questions as to how we should seek to order their relationships while giving them the social space to make their contributions to human well-being, under God."<sup>25</sup> In this era of crisis in evangelicalism, now is the time to consider and carry out our public commitments as called by God, who reigns in the public sphere.

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<sup>25</sup> Max L. Stackhouse, *God and Globalization: Volume 4: Globalization and Grace* (New York: Continuum, 2007), 115.