
Sungkon Park¹:

John Calvin's Ecclesiology and Korean Presbyterian Church²

Abstract:

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The aim of this paper is to evaluate Korean Presbyterian Church in the light of John Calvin's ecclesiology by consulting mainly the Korean theologians' academic journals. The Korean church experienced rapid growth since Protestantism arrived in 1885. This unprecedented growth, however, caused some harmful side effects such as church individualism, schism, and distorted understanding of mission. The Korean church sought adequate remedies to reverse the decline shape, but they were criticized on their program-oriented solutions, and even considered to be unbiblical. Thus, a deeper understanding on the nature of Church is desperately needed. This paper describes the reception and effects of Calvinism in Korean context, and how Calvin's ecclesiology may still pose influential possibilities for the Korean Presbyterian Church.

Keywords: John Calvin, Ecclesiology, Korean Presbyterian Church, Korean Church, Korean Calvinism.

I. Introduction

The Korean church experienced rapid growth ever since Protestantism arrived in Korea in 1885. Specifically for the last three decades until 1990, the number of believers increased almost twice every decade. This exponential church growth became a trade mark for the Korean church. The high speed of church growth, however, has not been

¹ Sungkon Park, koreai missziós lelkész Szlovákiában, a Selye János Egyetem Református Teológiai Karának óraadó tanára.

² The Korean Presbyterian Church refers to the Korean Presbyterian churches in South Korea which succeeds the Reformed (mainly John Calvin's) theological tradition on its foundation. And the term Korean church, which is recurrently appears in this paper, refers to the Korean Protestant Church in South Korea and is also used as a plural form of Protestant churches in Korea.

sustained and has declined slightly since mid-1990s. Furthermore, side effects from this rapid growth have begun to appear. The Korean church has been criticized for its authoritarianism, local church centrism, lack of democracy which is the result of the overemphasis on numerical growth and weak cooperation among denominations and local congregations.³ Some of the reasons that the Korean church's decline originate from losing its social credibility, and it is because of the immoral conduct of church leaders, low social responsibility, exclusivist attitude toward other religions, wide gaps between large and small churches.⁴

In response to its declination and antagonism from society, the Korean church has sought an adequate remedy to reverse the decline shape, such as seeker's church movement, Cell-church movement, the mission movement, and the church renewal movement. But these movements, with their programmatic efforts to recover growth in membership, could be short-term measures and only a program-oriented solution. The critique is that their remedial actions are ineffective, short-sighted and theologically questionable. Dong-Kyu Choi, a professor of church growth, argues that the Korean church needs to do the theological work to overcome the limitation of programmatic approaches and provide a new paradigm of the church growth.⁵ In the same vein, Joon-Sik Park, a professor of world evangelism, maintains that their responses have been reactive and shallow; the churches have not yet engaged in the critical theological self-reflection necessary for the renewal of the church at a more fundamental level, radical transformation at the level of its ecclesiology.⁶

³ Young-Gi Hong, "Progress and Pitfalls: Globalization and the Korean Church", Paper Presented at the IAMS Conference in Malaysia, 31 July-7 August 2004.

⁴ Byung-Joon Chung, "A Reflection on the Growth and Decline of the Korean Protestant Church", *IRM* 103(2) (2014): 340.

⁵ Dong-Kyu Choi, "The Foundations of the Missional Ecclesiology for the Growth of the True Church", *The Gospel and Praxis* 23 [*Bokemgwa Silcheon Sinhak*] (2011): 295-296.

⁶ Joon-Sik Park, "Korean Protestant Christianity: A Missiological Reflection", *IBMR* 36(2) (2012): 59-62.

Therefore, it is high time to examine Korean churches with deep theological reflection on the Church. The ecclesiology is in urgent need for reconstruction because the crisis faced by churches today is deeply connected with the lack of understanding of what the essence of church is—the very question of ecclesiology.⁷ Thus, it is very relevant to evaluate contemporary Korean Presbyterian Church in the light of Calvin's ecclesiology. John Calvin, as one of the founders of the Presbyterian Church, takes a special place of affection and interest in Korea. Korean Presbyterian churches originated from the Reformed tradition (mainly Calvin) which makes up almost 70% among the whole Korean Protestant churches. It statistically demonstrates that their portion in Korean churches is crucial in its effect on society. Thus, it is worth taking a long look at Calvin's ecclesiology for the Korean Presbyterian Church as they are struggling to find a solution from church decline.

II. Reception of Calvinism in Korea

1. Brief History

Calvinism was first introduced in Korea when Samuel A. Moffett, a missionary of Northern Presbyterian Church (USA), established a theological education center to train workers for the church. He started a theology class in 1901 which marked the foundation of Presbyterian Theological Seminary in Korea and Calvinism was first introduced at this seminary by American missionaries and professors. It is known that Calvin was introduced by G. Engel, a professor of church history, and he compiled a two-volume church history text in 1915.⁸

The first writing about Calvin in Korea was "The Life of Calvin" by Sionsanin which was published as a serial from November 29, 1916 to June 20, 1917 on the *Kidoksinbo*, the Christian news

⁷ Yoon-Bae Choi, "Calvin's Ecclesiology: The Essence of Church", *Journal of Systematic Theology* 8 [*Jojik Sinhak Yeongu*] (2006), 8-43.

⁸ Gyeung-Su Park, "A Brief History of Calvin Studies in Korea", *Korean Association of Christian Studies* 75(1) [*Hankuk Gidokgyo Sinhak Nonchong*] (2011): 146-147.

magazine.⁹ But it was not the writer's own work rather he merely translated one of Japanese pastors' work about Calvin. It is assumed to be an anonymous writer with fluent Japanese language. Nevertheless, his introduction of Calvin's life can be considered a highly crucial resource by the virtue that it was the first introduction of Calvin in Korea.¹⁰

In 1924, In-Young Kim published a study entitled "John Calvin: Religious Reformer" in *Sinhak Sege* [The Theological World], a Methodist journal. It is significant in that it was the first scholarly paper published in a theological journal. The fact that the Methodist denomination carried a work on Calvin ahead of the Presbyterian journal demonstrates that the Presbyterian and Methodist denomination were in a close working relationship.¹¹ This was possible because there was a common understanding on the Evangelical theology. Because of this phenomenon, it is said that the theology of the early Korean Presbyterian church was not the Reformed theology but the Evangelical (conservative) theology. Seok-Soo Kim, a church historian, argues that there had been no in-depth studies regarding Calvin before 1930 in the Presbyterian Theological Seminary. The first emergence of the term "Reformed" can only be traced back to 1937.¹²

It was in 1934 that a study of Calvin began comprehensively when *Sinhak Jinam* [The Theological Review] of the Presbyterian Theological Seminary did a special feature on Calvin. So far the works were mostly translations of Japanese resources, however the works published in the Theological Review were done by Korean scholars who had studied abroad. Thus, as Gyeong-Su Park, a professor of church history, asserts, "it was a true beginning of the

⁹ Seok-Soo Kim, "A Study on Evangelical Theology of Korean Presbyterian Church before 1930", *Journal of the Church History Society in Korea* 50 [*Hankuk Gyohoesa Hakhoeji*] (2018): 274.

¹⁰ Gyeong-Su Park, op. cit., 148.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Seok-Soo Kim, op. cit., 255-288.

study and introduction of Calvin in Korea.”¹³ Since then studies on Calvin continued, but the work was withdrawn after the Presbyterian Theological Seminary closed as it opposed the Japanese imperialism’s enforcement of Shinto worship.

Before liberation in 1945, there was a transition period for the introduction of the Reformation theology into Korea. Kyo-Seong Ahn, a professor of church history, found out three things regarding the Reformation in Korea by examining seven books published in the pre-liberation years: First, concerning authors, the initiative in authorship gradually moved from the expatriate to the national. Second, in terms of content, some dealt with the history of the Reformation and post-Reformation, and the other portrayed three representative heroes of the Reformation, Luther, Knox and Calvin. Third, regarding the years of publication, there was a constant interest in the Reformation in the pre-liberation among Korean Protestant churches.¹⁴

After liberation, Yoon-Sun Park wrote in 1949, “An Overview of Reformed Ecclesiology” which is said to be the first introduction of Calvin’s ecclesiology to Korea. During the early 1950s, he also wrote in 12 serial articles called “Calvinism” and dealt with not only the main Calvinist doctrines, but other practical topics such as the relationship between Christians and the state, woman ministers and their position in the church from a Calvinist perspective. This is the first instance of exposition of Calvinism from a Korean perspective.¹⁵ In the 1950s Calvinist thought was largely introduced by the translation of foreign books.¹⁶

¹³ Gyeong-Su Park, op. cit., 149.

¹⁴ Kyo-Seong Ahn, “An Investigation into the Appropriation of the Korean Protestant Church of the Reformation: With Special Reference to the Books on the Reformation in the Pre-Liberation Year”, *Journal of the Church History Society in Korea* 48 [Hankuk Gyohoesa Hakhoeji] (2017): 7-35.

¹⁵ Gyeong-Su Park, op. cit., 150-151.

¹⁶ For instance, Jae-Joon Kim, *Portrait of John Calvin* (T.H.L. parker), Byung-Sup Lee, *Calvinism* (A. Dakin), Yoon-Sun Park, *The Basic Ideas of Calvinism* (H. Meeter), Gyeong-Su Park, op. cit., 149-151.

In the 1960s Calvin's main work on *Institute of Christian Religion* was first introduced. In 1960, Jong-Sung Lee translated Hugh T. Kerr's *A Compend of the Institutes of Christian Religion* which summarizes and explains the *Institutes*. This enabled an indirect encounter with the *Institutes*, and greatly influenced theologians and pastors. In 1964, volume I of the *Institutes* was translated and published by Bok-Yoon Shin and Chul-Ha Han. In 1977, the entire *Institutes* was translated by Moon-Jae Kim and this was the first time the *Institutes* was completely translated into Korean.¹⁷

After the establishment of the Society of Calvin Studies in Korea in 1963, it held a lecture session on the 400th year of Calvin's death in 1964 and the materials were published as a Memorial Collection on the 400th Year of Calvin's Death.¹⁸ In the 1960s and 1970s a large number of significant books were translated to further stimulate Calvin studies. In particular W. Niesel's *Die Theologie Calvins* (1957) was the first work translated by Jong-Sung Lee from German to Korean. In the 1970s the works on the Calvin were dealt with a diverse range of topics such as ecclesiology, educational principles, pneumatology, political principles, soteriology, state theory and ministry.¹⁹ After the 1980s, doctorate scholars on Calvin emerged: Sou-Yong Lee (Strasbourg University of France in 1984) was the first to study abroad, and Yang-Ho Lee (Yonsei University in 1985) was first in Korea. After that, countless scholarly works, either translation or writing concerning Calvin, were published by Korean theologians.²⁰

The Society of Calvin Studies in Korea (in 1963) was reestablished as Korea Calvin Society in 1985. It not only leads Calvin studies in Korea but also participates in international Calvin studies. Translations of Calvin's works steadily continued with Calvin's Old and New Testament commentaries, sermons, and theological

¹⁷ But at this period the translations of the *Institutes* was not from French or Latin, rather all were translated from English or Japanese translations. Gyeong-Su Park, "A Brief History of Calvin Studies in Korea", 152.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 152-153.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 153-154.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 155-156.

treatises. *Institutes of Christian Religion* was also newly translated by Young-Min Ko (2008), directly from Latin. The first edition of the *Institutes* (1536) was also translated from Latin by Byung-Ho Moon (2009).²¹ After the reception of Calvinism, the concern on Reformation and the feature of Calvin is still prevailed among the Korean Presbyterian theologians and their scholarly articles.²² Nevertheless, a proper bibliography of the Korean theologian's work on Calvinism has not been collated in an organized manner. According to a survey conducted by Kyong-Lim Kang, a church historian, the number of scholarly works and articles about Calvin written by Korean theologians almost amounts to 1,900 since 1924. Although a final bibliography was attempted by a number of Korean scholars, there does not seem to be one yet.²³ Currently Calvin's theological studies are being conducted by organizations and institutes such as the Society of Calvin Studies in Korea (1963, Korea Calvin Study 1985), Institute for Calvinistic Studies in Korea (1983), Korea Reformed Theology Society (1996), Society of Reformed Theology (2002), Korean Presbyterian Theological Society (2002) and Korean Institute for Reformed Studies (2006).

2. Calvin's Influence on the Korean Church and Society

²¹ Ibid., 156-158.

²² According to Sun-Young Kim's analysis, 78 articles addresses 16th Century Christianity in the *Journal of the Church History Society in Korea* since its publication. The total of 425 articles were published in 53 volumes of the journal since its foundation in 1979 till 2019 and almost 20% of the whole articles concerns Christianity in the 16th century. And it is noticeable that all 78 articles focus on the Protestant Reformation and predominantly on its main figures, Martin Luther and John Calvin. Sun-Young Kim, "An Analysis and Evaluation of the Articles on Christianity in the 16th Century in the *Journal of the Church History Society in Korea*", *Journal of the Church History Society in Korea* 55 [*Hankuk Gyohoesa Hakhoeji*] (2020): 145-182.

²³ Kyong-Lim Kang, "History of Calvin Studies in Korea (1): Korean Calvin Bibliography as the First Step", *Journal of Historical Theology* 11 [*Yeoksa Sinhak Nonchong*] (2006): 222-223.

It is widely acknowledged that Calvin has made a great contribution to the churches and society in the Western world. His influence, however, has not been confined to the Western world, it has also increasingly made a mark in Asia. For instance, over the past decades, the theology of Calvinism has widely spread in China. It especially appealed to Chinese intellectuals who constitute mostly to the house church leaders in urban areas. By focusing on the Reformed theology, the Calvinist churches in China rejects 'heresy' and the earlier Pentecostal character of Christianity in China. Calvinists are expected to reshape their world view, particularly by reassessing their life values, morality and puritanical way of life.²⁴

Moreover, Calvin's influence on the Korean church is significant in various aspects. In particular, Presbyterian churches that has inherited Calvin's theology form majority of the Korean churches. It clearly indicates that the influence of Calvinism has been great, and this is still the case now in Korean churches. Furthermore, Calvin also contributed in making the theology of Korean church's conservative tradition. In Korea, the gospel was spread through Scottish and American missionaries who were mainly from the Reformed tradition, and they taught that the Bible is the sole Word of God and is an example of Christian life. Calvin's theology which regards the Bible as a crucial subject, has helped to formulate a Bible-centered theology in Korea and this contributed to the revival of the Korean church. In the 1960s and 1970s, Abraham Kuyper and Henry Meter who revitalized Calvin's understanding of common grace, introduced it to the Korean Presbyterian church. This theological concept established a foundation for the Korean Presbyterian church to change the culture by penetrating deeply into the world.²⁵

Calvin's thought made a great influence even on the Korean society in the area of nation's modernization, national consciousness, development of democratization, and economic growth affected by

²⁴ Jie Kang, "The Rise of Calvinist Christianity in Urbanising China", *Religions* (Basel, Switzerland: MDPI) (2019): 1-12.

²⁵ Ho-Duck Kwon, "A Study of Calvin's Theological Contribution to Korean Church", *Korea Reformed Theology* 27 [*Hankuk Gaehyuk Sinhak*] (2010): 8-47.

Christian labor ethics.²⁶ Specifically on the issue of democratization, Jae-Buhm Hwang, a professor of systematic theology, emphasizes the significant influence of the early Korean Presbyterian Church on the early phases of Korea's democratisation in four ways. Firstly, the Western Protestant mission works in general were visibly conducive for dissemination and cultivation of egalitarian and democratic ideals, with the mission churches becoming sites of do-it-yourself democracy. Secondly, the Nevius (Mission) Methods of the Korean Presbyterian church came to foster the democratic spirit of self-support and self-government, resulting in its rapid growth. Thirdly, with the implementation of a nationwide, representative and democratic polity (presbytery) with a constitution, the church even facilitated law-binding and institutional democracy for Koreans in general and Korean Christians in particular. Fourthly, the church's democratic working deeply inspired Korean democratic politicians, especially Chang-Ho Ahn, who had an important influence on the making of the Provisional Government of Korea and its Constitution.²⁷ In the same vein, Kyu-Hong Yeon, a professor of church history, argues that Calvin's theology greatly contributed to the democratization movement in the 1970s by providing a theoretical foundation for political theology and Christian social ethics. He maintains that the Korean Presbyterian churches' active involvement in the movement was rooted in the application of the theology and thought of John Calvin.²⁸

Nevertheless, it should not be overlooked the fact that many obstacles, such as Fatalism, Confucian hierarchy, Confucian past-oriented way of thinking, lingering on Shamanistic ideas on luck and

²⁶ Chae-Young Chong, "The Influence and Meaning of Korean Presbyterian Church on Korean Society", *Christian Thought* 645 [*Kidokgyo Sasang*] (2012): 38-48.

²⁷ Jae-Buhm Hwang, "The early Korean Protestant Churches' Impact on Korea's Democratisation: with Special Reference to the Korean Presbyterian Church", *HTS Theologese Studies/ Theological Studies* 70(1) (2014):1-7.

²⁸ Kyu-Hong, Yeon, "The Korean Democratization Movement and Calvin", in Stükelberger Christoph and Bernhardt Reinhold (eds.), *Calvin Global: How Faith Influences Societies* (Geneva: Globethics, 2009), 205-215.

bad luck and *Kibok Sinang* (prosperity-oriented) in the Korean church have interrupted Calvin's theology to flourish in Korea.²⁹ Moreover, Korean Presbyterian church's Calvinistic Biblicism has been a decisive cause not only for the explosive church growth but also for its notorious schisms. The Korean Presbyterian theologians' responses to Calvinism have been noticeably ambivalent. On this issue, Jae-Buhm Hwang explains that the church's conservative wing used Calvinism mainly to defend their Biblicist theology. On the other hand, the relatively progressive wing of the church was perhaps overwhelmed by the conservative wing's rigid Calvinistic and Biblicist position, and tried to stand aloof from Calvinism.³⁰ This ambivalent responses to the Calvin also caused different understandings of Predestination in Calvinism in Korea.³¹ Along with the Biblical and Systematic theology, the ambivalent positions are also exposed in the Practical theology, in liturgical difference in worship service among Korean Presbyterian churches. In a comparative analysis about the worship (liturgical) of three main different Presbyterian churches, Kyong-Kuk Han, a professor of practical theology, addresses that though they have some common features like emphasizing the use of Church calendar, balanced worship between the Word and sacrament, they held many different views with respect to their own theologies, thus it is certain that there is the existence of various interpretations and praxes in accordance

²⁹ For general understanding, yet extensive and deep, about how the preexisted Korean religion effected to the introduction of Christianity as "Western Religion", see this material. Sung-Deuk Oak, *The Making of Korean Christianity: Protestant Encounters with Korean Religions 1876-1915* (Waco, Texas: Baylor University Press, 2013).

³⁰ Jae-Buhm Hwang, "Korean Theologians' Ambivalent Responses to Calvinism", *NZStH*, 53Bd, Walter de Gruyter (2011): 480-496.

³¹ Yung-Han Kim, "Reception of the Calvinism by Korean Church: Centered on the Doctrine of Predestination", *Korea Reformed Theology* 27 [*Hankuk Gaehyuk Sinhak*] (2010): 48-75.

with the various denominational theologies within Korean Presbyterian churches.³²

The Korean Presbyterian churches have used Calvin's ecclesiology when they have faced critical crisis or important issues. On this issue, Jung-Suck Rhee, a professor of systematic theology, maintains that since Korean Presbyterian churches have regarded John Calvin as their theological father and bestowed the highest authority, they have attempted to justify their position by claiming John Calvin in the important disputes of issues. The issue of the most discussion was church schism, and Calvin has been quoted to justify their separation.³³ As stated above, thus, it is demonstrated that Calvin's ecclesiology has been used differently for different denominations in Korean Presbyterian churches. The conservative denominations (ex. *Haptong, Koshin*) used it for the background of their church service, nature, Bible, sacrament; progressive (and holistic) denominations (ex. *Tonghap, Kijang*) used it specifically for the issue of church unity, ecumenism, WCC and social service.³⁴ Overall, positively, Calvin's theology contributed to equipping modernization, industrialization and democratization in Korea; negatively, it provided the legitimacy of church schism and disunity among Korean Presbyterian churches by different interpretation and use of Calvin's theology.

III. Calvin's Ecclesiology and Contemporary Korean Church

1. General Overview of Calvin's Ecclesiology in *Institutes* Book IV³⁵

The doctrine of the church is a major part of John Calvin's theology. Book IV of the *Institutes* is almost completely devoted to the church

³² Kyong-Kuk Han, "An Understanding of Worship in Major Presbyterian Denominations in Korea during the Period from 1980-1990 Through the Writing of Representative Scholars", *Theology and Praxis* 67 [*Sinhakgwa Silcheon*] (2019): 7-33.

³³ Jung-Suck Rhee, "Calvin's Doctrine of the Church and the Korean Church", *Korea Reformed Theology* 27 [*Hankuk Gaehyuk Sinhak*] (2010): 76-100.

³⁴ Bong-Geun, Cho, "A Comparative Study on Ecclesiology of John Calvin and Sects of the Korean Presbyterian Church", *Journal of Systematic Theology* 12 [*Jojiksinhak Yeongu*] (2009): 10-37.

³⁵ John T. McNeill (ed.) and Ford Lewis Battles (trans.), *Calvin: Institutes of the Christian Religion* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1960). Hereafter it will be shortened as only 'Institutes'.

which takes up more or less one fifth of the whole of the *Institutes*. It generally deals with the church, titling as “the external means or aims by which God invites us into the society of Christ and hold us therein.” It is broadly divided into two major parts, Ecclesiology (4.1-19) and Civil Government (4.20).

We can find some distinct aspects of the Church emphasized in the *Institutes*. In Calvin's ecclesiology, there is a vivid awareness of the double aspect of the church as the invisible and visible. Calvin refers to the Church “not only to the visible church but also to all God's elect, in whose number are included the dead.”³⁶ Calvin never relaxed the tension between the visible and the invisible church, but he laid more emphasis upon the church as an external institution recognizable as true by certain distinguishing marks. He held the two poles together, but turned his attention more and more to the visible church and affirmed the necessity of partaking in the Lord's Supper with it.³⁷ Although by definition it is imperfect and contains numerous hypocrites, Calvin insistently stresses the sinfulness of schism.³⁸ Calvin intended to show clearly that God is really the Lord of the church. As the images of the visible church are those of mother and school, which he frequently combines.³⁹ Both insist that the Church as ‘mother of all believers’ and ‘God's school’ fulfils a unique and indispensable function in the work of salvation. Calvin ascribes to the church a significant role in the economy of redemption. For him, the Church ordinarily serves as the society within which faith is born, nourished and strengthened.⁴⁰

For Calvin, the Church is strictly one. Perhaps it would make sense to show awareness of the fact that despite his radical break with the Roman Catholic Church, Calvin did not transcend the notion that outside the church there is no salvation.⁴¹ By the fact that the

³⁶ Institutes IV.1.2.

³⁷ Institutes IV.1.7.

³⁸ Institutes IV.1.10.

³⁹ Institutes IV.1.1; IV.1.4; IV.1.20.

⁴⁰ Institutes IV.1.5.

⁴¹ Institutes IV. 1.4.

Lord offers Himself to us in his instrument, there arise an integral structure of the congregation of the faithful, being joined and knit together, the body of Christ is built up, and we grow in every part in adhesion to Him who is the Head and become at unity among ourselves. Thus, the Church is not a rigid institution but a living organization, a fellowship of mutual service and helpfulness.⁴²

The visible church can be recognized “Wherever we see the Word of God purely preached and heard, and the sacraments administered according to Christ’s institution, there, it is not to be doubted, a church of God exists.”⁴³ With this assertions, Calvin emphasizes the valuable importance of people actually hearing what was preached and applying this to their lives. Regarding the relationship between preaching and sacrament, Calvin emphasizes that communion belongs to the fullness of worship, it is not once-a-year occasion without serious attention but all Christians might have it in frequent use bonding in the unity of the body of Christ.⁴⁴

Regarding the purpose of church offices, Calvin stresses that all church offices have the one purpose of proclaiming Christ and His reign, for only so is the church truly edified.⁴⁵ By distinguishing four functions, Calvin did not attempt to construct a system of orders, but he recognized from the Scripture that these various functions must be permanently fulfilled if the Church is to expand and be preserved. In terms with discipline, Calvin concludes that a Church may exist without discipline; however, without discipline a Church has no guarantee that it will exist for long. From next accounts we can find Calvin’s core thought on the church discipline: “As the saving doctrine of Christ is the soul of the Church, so does discipline serves as its sinews, through which the members of the body hold together, each in its own place.”⁴⁶ Calvin’s understanding of a true church in the *Institutes* is still relevant to the Korean Presbyterian church which

⁴² *Institutes* IV.1.2.

⁴³ *Institutes* IV.1.9.

⁴⁴ *Institutes* IV.17.44.

⁴⁵ *Institutes* IV.3.1.

⁴⁶ *Institutes* IV.12.1.

has suffered from church individualism, church schism, and distorted understanding of mission.

2. Critical Evaluation of the Korean Presbyterian Church by Calvin's Ecclesiology

1) Church Individualism

Church individualism (or unit-Churchism) has always been criticized whenever it mentions the problems in the Korean church. It is a deep seated disease and has been heavily affiliated with overemphasis on church growth and expansion in the Korean church.⁴⁷ It caused, directly or indirectly, church conflict, schism, disunity, secularism, moral deviation of church leaders, and lack of social credibility, aggressive mission and more.

For the ordinary Korean Protestant Christians, their views on Church have a tendency to consider their local churches where they regularly attend the Sunday worship service and practice their faith. For them, thus, 'Church is a local church'. So, it is common for Korean Christians to say, "I am a member of *Somang* Presbyterian Church" which means that "I belongs to *Somang* Presbyterian local church". Instead, for the European Christians saying, "I am a member of the Reformed (Presbyterian) church" which has with wide concept of Church, not directly mentioning the local church they attend. In this sense, in Korean context, the local church is absolutely crucial, and for Korean Christians, it is the place where their faith began and raised. For some reason, church individualism played a significant role in church growth in Korea, competing with other local churches under the banner of "church growth" and "evangelization".

However, church individualism made a harmful effect to the Korean church. It produced a narrow and distorted ecclesiology. The goal of a church has been closely related with an individual local church's numerical growth which naturally hinders cooperation and unity with other local churches and denominations. The local

⁴⁷ Chang-Yeon Cho, "Church Individualism and the Church Expansionism: Analyzing the Empirical", *Korea Reformed Theology* 20 [*Hankuk Gaehyuk Sinhak*] (2006): 341-368.

congregation, with slogan of “church growth matters!” exerts to spread gospel to grow their own congregation, even the method they do this is far from Biblical. For Korean churches, due to this understanding of Church, it is difficult to bear a Universal church in their mind. Church individualism is therefore related with the question of the basic foundation of church, that is, question of church’s essence.

According to Sang-Gyoo Lee, a professor of church history, argues historically, Presbyterianism was a dual character that opposed the medieval hierarchy and emphasized the autonomy and independence of the Church. The way to deny the medieval hierarchy of Roman Catholicism is to choose individual church such as congregationalism, or the way to deny the authoritarianism is to pursue a so-called Free Church system. However, the Reformed (Presbyterian) Church systematically avoids these extremes: it opposes the authoritarianism (hierarchy) of the Church, but it does not support the individualism or the Free Church neither. Nevertheless, the Korean Presbyterian church has the form of both extremes at the same time.⁴⁸

Calvin stressed the proclamation of God’s Word and the sacrament to be the mark of the true Church. It will be clear that the only way to solve the problems of the Korean church is to return to the Word of God. It is certain that Jesus Christ as the headship of the Church will renew and reform the church through the proclamation of the Word. Therefore, the pure and right proclamation of the Word is crucial to recover the identity the true Church.⁴⁹ Thus, it strongly asks the Korean church to focus on the essence of the church, not on the programmatic design of the church which sometimes becomes trend among local churches. Church should be the body of Christ

⁴⁸ Sang-Gyoo Lee, “100 Years of Korean Presbyterian Church: A Historical Approach”, Conference Paper, The Reformation: Yesterday and Today, 7 April 2012, Saemoonan Presbyterian Church, Seoul.

⁴⁹ In-Kyu An, “Karl Barth’s View on Three Different Forms of God’s Word: Focusing on the Proclamation of the Word”, *Journal of Systematic Theology* 29 [Josik Sinhak Yeongu] (2018): 110-141.

which remind us Church is God-centered, not man-centered. Only God to be glorified.

Most importantly, the concept of church needs to be expanded from local church to Universal church. On this issue, Eung-Seob Kang, a systematic theologian, clearly maintains that the Universal church is an official institution which works for the official ministry of Jesus Christ. The Church is an assembly of believers who believe in Jesus Christ, and the nature of what the Church does is in accordance with the official duties of Jesus Christ. Thus, the fact that the Church becomes the unit-church has turned it into an institution to execute someone's personal affairs. Korean church needs to change from 'individualized or institutional' to 'community or officialised', from 'unit-churchism or unit-denomination' to 'official church or official denomination'.⁵⁰ Through this new understanding of the church, the Korean Presbyterian church needs to live out in the middle of public society with concrete Christian identity. Calvin himself suggested plenty of theological seeds of public theology. His teaching will encourage the Korean Presbyterian church not to remain within individual and inner spirituality, but to encounter the social and economic issues of the world and to realize the vision of the Kingdom of God in this world by reforming the society according to the scripture's teaching.⁵¹

2) Disunity and Church Schism

Korean Presbyterian church has been faced with several splits since 1950 and was separated into many denominations. It is even shameful to confess that, according to the statistics of Culture, Sports and Tourism in 2018, there are 286 different dominations among the

⁵⁰ Eung-Seob Kang, "A Study on the 'Unit-churchism' in Korean Protestant Church: Compare to Second Ecumenical Council Creed", *Korean Journal of Systematic Theology* 50 [*Hankuk Jojiksinhak Nonchong*] (2018): 7-53.

⁵¹ Gyeong-Su Park, "Calvin and the 21st Century Korean Church and Society", *Korean Journal of Christian Studies* 69 [*Hankuk Gidokgyo Sinhak Nonchong*] (2010): 139.

Presbyterian Church in Korea.⁵² The church split also partly results from church individualism and church growth-oriented mentality. It is because the plausible reason for church division originated not only from the certain theological application but it also came from church politics, egoism and hegemony conflict within the church. The church split caused problems in the Korean church such as low level of pastors, unbiblical interpretation of Scripture, and most of all, disunity among the churches.

Indeed, Korean Presbyterian church was established by the ecumenical spirit as the result of mutual cooperation and collaborative work among missionaries of four different Presbyterian churches in three countries. However, in the aftermath of the liberation in 1945, such spirit of unity began to fall apart and the era of disputes soon followed. Two questions were seriously disputed in the church: first, the demand of repentance over the Shinto-Shrine worship, and second, the theological difference between the conservative and the liberal. In the 1950s, the Korean Presbyterian church was divided three times in 1952, 1953 and 1959, resulting in four different groups. Since 1979, non-mainline churches have experienced repeated schisms. The divided groups were eager to justify themselves based on various reasons such as orthodoxy, exclusive in-group consciousness, and anti-Communism, together with black-and-white mentality, aiming to consolidate their status.⁵³ The schisms resulted from the weak sense of unity and ecclesiology of the Korean Presbyterian church, which played a role in its disunity.

Inevitably, it is highly demanded that the Korean Presbyterian church grow into unity and maturity according to Biblical teachings and Calvin's thinking.⁵⁴ Yong-Seuck Cho, a church historian,

⁵² Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism, *Current Situation of Religion in Korea* (Seoul: Sae Sungkyun, 2018), 108-118.

⁵³ Hee-Kuk Lim, "Education of the History of Korean Presbyterianism for the Cooperation and Unity of the Church", *Korean Journal of Theology* 8 [*Jangno Gyohoewa Sinhak*] (2011): 39-82.

⁵⁴ Jae-Geon Ha, "Unity and Catholicity in the Korean Presbyterian Church: An Ecumenical Reformed Assessment", *Verbum et Ecclesia* 37(1) (2016): 1-8.

maintains that Calvin is truly an advocate of ecumenical movement. Calvin realized that the Universal church is one, and that all the local churches, insofar as they utilize the preaching of the Word of God and administer the sacraments, are the local manifestations of one Universal church. His movements towards reconciliation and peace were not only between the Lutherans and Reformed, but among the Reformed themselves. Everywhere and always Calvin tried to bring peace and to avoid dissension and schism.⁵⁵ Calvin strived to maintain not only the unity of the local church but also that of the entire Protestant church. Thus, he was called “the ecumenical theologian”.⁵⁶

For this reason, Hee-Kuk Lim, a professor of church history, strongly suggests the unity among the Presbyterian churches by focusing on same Reformed theology and confession. He argues, alliance and agreement is strongly emphasized even in the principle of the Reformed church, which is the root of the Korean Presbyterian church. For example, the Second Helvetic Confession is a joint Confession of Faith by the Reformed church. The denominations in the Korean Presbyterian church that have inherited the legacy of the Reformed church must reunite in Jesus Christ on the basis of the Word of God, through the ministry of the Holy Spirit.⁵⁷ In the same vein, Yoon-Bae Choi, a professor of systematic theology, also argues that Calvin has emphasized that the Church is to unify in Jesus Christ's Body. John Calvin's ecumenical spirit, as the principle of reconciliation and peace, harmony and accordance, healing and recovery has been the foundation of his ecclesiology, and it has the focus of 'recovering movements for true church' as the essential quality of the church, Christ's Body. This Calvin's ecumenical

⁵⁵ Yong-Seuck Cho, “Calvin's Understanding of the Church and Its Relevance for the Ecumenical Movement”, *Mission and Theology* 40 [*Seongyowa Sinhak*] (2016): 421-448.

⁵⁶ Chul Hong, “A Comparative Study in the Ecclesiology of Calvin and Old Princeton Theology”, *Korea Reformed Journal* 17 [*Gaehyuk Nonchong*] (2011): 156-166.

⁵⁷ Hee-Kuk Lim, “Prospect of the Reconciliation to Unity of the Korean Presbyterian Church among the Divided Denomination”, *Korean Journal of Theology* 8 [*Jangno Gyohoewa Sinhak*] (2011): 245-246.

theology and spirituality can be claimed as a very useful principle for Korean churches' ecumenical movements.⁵⁸

3) Distorted Understanding of Mission

The Korean church was only known to the world as an 'object of mission' through the missionary reports 130 years ago. Currently it has become known as a missionary sending church that is a 'subject of mission.'⁵⁹ According to the report from the Korea World Missions Association in 2020, the Korean church sends 22,259 missionaries among 168 countries in the world. In this sense, the Korean church has dramatically changed from mission-reporting to mission-conducting, even mission-organizing. Repeatedly, this positive perception about the Korean church's mission is closely connected with unprecedented church growth. Kook-Il Han, a professor of missiology, carefully analyses this issue that the Korean church has a short history in Christianity which means that it has a vivid and positive memory, directly or indirectly, of church growth through mission history. Thus, mission is not separable from church growth in Korean context, positively it can be the motivation of the evangelization, negatively, it is considered that mission can be understood as one of the programs for the church growth. In short, mission is understood as a tool of church growth, not the essence of church.⁶⁰

With this distorted understanding of mission, Korean missionaries have sometimes been criticized for attempting to impose "Korean denominational patterns and structures on indigenous churches."⁶¹

⁵⁸ Kwang-Mook Kim, "John Calvin's Ecumenical Theology and a Theological Perspective on Ecumenical Movements in Korean Church: Focusing on Korean Presbyterian Church", *Korea Journal of Systematic Theology* 52 [*Hankuk Jojicsinhak Nonchong*] (2018): 7-48.

⁵⁹ Kyo-Seong Ahn, "The Missionary Spirit of the Korean Church", Conference Paper, Global Mission Consultation & Celebration, Nakano Sun Plaza, Tokyo, 11-14 May 2010.

⁶⁰ Kook-Il Han, "Missional Church in the view point of the Korean Local Church", *Mission and Theology* 30 [*Seongyowa Sinhak*] (2012): 91-93.

⁶¹ Joon-Sik Park, "Korean Protestant Christianity: A Missiological Reflection", 62.

They have tried to transplant their home churches' or denominations' confessions and successes onto their mission field without sincere partnership, with a triumphant concept of mission. On this issue, Julia Ma, a missiologist, argues that "If our mission is to conquer the land and bring a victory with our own strengths and strategies, we may never stop the unfortunate historical cycle that will haunt the church with its self-crusading and self-glorifying goals."⁶²

In this point, therefore, it is significantly meaningful for the Korean Presbyterian church to revisit Calvin's missional ecclesiology. It is wrong that the Reformers were not conscious of the missionary ideas and displayed no missionary activity. Calvin was not lacking in concern for the proclamation of the gospel to people outside faith and church.⁶³ Calvin's chief concern was spread of the reformed faith in Christendom, conceived as the mission of the Word of God. The first and most important mission field of Calvin was the city of Geneva. With the establishment of Geneva Academy in 1559, Calvin was to become "an evangelist of Europe" and Geneva "a missionary center".⁶⁴ Calvin not only provided the theoretical principle for the mission field, but also actually sent missionaries especially into France and Brazil. Even though the attempt to send the missionaries and evangelize the native people in Brazil is evaluated as a failure, it cannot be denied that it was a clear example of his efforts to evangelize the foreign countries. Missionary efforts overseas originated from Calvin's missional ecclesiology, which is the concept of expanding the Kingdom of God.⁶⁵

Such thoughts of Calvin's missional ecclesiology is an important guide on the issue of the goal and method of mission in today's

⁶² Julia C. Ma, "A Critical Appraisal of Korean Missionary Work" in S. Hun Kim and Wonsuk Ma (eds.) *Korean Diaspora and Christian Mission* (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf & Stock), 145.

⁶³ Yoon-Bae Choi, "Missiology and Mission Work by John Calvin", *Bible and Theology* 62 [*Seonggyungwa Sinhak*] (2012): 133-162.

⁶⁴ Gyeung-Su Park, "Calvin's Reformation and Mission", *Mission and Theology* 21 [*Seongyowa Sinhak*] (2008): 97-129.

⁶⁵ Dae-Woo Hwang, "A Study on the Relation between the Ecclesiology and the Mission of Calvin", *Mission and Theology* 24 [*Seongyowa Sinhak*] (2009): 43-87.

Korean churches. It teaches that the goal of mission is to enlarge God's Kingdom and not an individual denomination, it also encourages for the Korean church to spread the gospel regardless of any obstacles. According to Gyeong-Ho Jung, a professor of missiology, Calvin is a true missionary who put his life on the line to preach and proclaim the gospel. He is a frontier missionary as he renewed the churches. Calvin's idea of mission had generated the World Mission Movement and extended to Africa and Asia, and especially in the late 19th century reached Korea and became the foundation of the Korean Presbyterian church. Since the Korean Presbyterian church is established from Calvin-based theology, it is its missionary task to repay this evangelistic debt to the world.⁶⁶

This missionary accountability should reach, regardless of locality and people, both to the same ethnic people and foreigners, both to mainland and overseas. It should not avoid mentioning on Calvin's concerns the weak and sick in the society. Regarding social welfare, at least 50% of the church's offering was used to carry out its social task. Calvin's focus was on the fact that all that we have are gifts of God, so as stewards, we are to use the gifts according to God's will.⁶⁷ In his ministry Calvin had to meet a number of European people with the sufferings which were raised from wars, diseases and poverty. These situations stimulated Calvin to deepen his thoughts in his *Institutes* and the *Bible Commentaries*.⁶⁸

In short, Calvin's mission is based on the Bible and the obedience of Christ's command. Calvin's mission is to spread the gospel through the church renewal and reformation. He understood that the true aspect of mission is the restoration of the true gospel and the church, the participation of church members in social responsibility, and

⁶⁶ Gyeong-Ho Jung, "Understanding of John Calvin's Missional Theology and Frontier Mission as Missional Activity", *Presbyterian Theological Quarterly* 84(4) [*Sinhak Jinam*] (2017): 250-257.

⁶⁷ Gyeong-Su Park, "Calvin and the 21st Century Korean Church and Society", 142.

⁶⁸ In-Sub Ahn, "Calvin's Thoughts on the Ministry and the Task of Korean Church: Centering on Calvin's Ideas and Works about Social Welfare", *Korea Reformed Journal* 11 [*Gaehyuk Nonchong*] (2009): 345-370.

building of the Kingdom of God in the whole world.⁶⁹ On this point, the Korean Presbyterian church should take heed on Calvin's missional ecclesiology for searching of true and authentic concept of mission.

IV. Conclusion

Kyung-Sik Pae, a professor of systematic theology, critically evaluates the Korean church in the light of Calvin's ecclesiology: 1) the Korean church tends to emphasize on love rather than justice which may dilute the sense of sin. 2) Christians are not well educated in the Church. They are baptized without pre-formation. (Confirmation class) 3) Churches are evaluated by quantity rather than quality. 4) Churches focus on trends and special events and programs rather than worship in the church. 5) Church members tend to seek to live Christian lives to gain recognition from the pastors than from God.⁷⁰ His criticism is summarized that the Korean church is more interested in the things of nonessential than essential.

Consequently, the Korean Presbyterian church should abandon any non-theological fact which is rooted, directly or indirectly, in the ministry, mission work, and church activity. It needs to pay heed on how Calvin loved the church and tried to eliminate false theological factors, making a true church that is based on the Bible and church history. Even though the context of the 16th Century Calvinism and contemporary Korean churches are vastly different, the crucial contents of the teaching and the positive effect are still relevant in the Korean Presbyterian church. The Korean Presbyterian church, challenged with the restoration of the church internally and recovery of its credibility externally, should turn to Calvin's true meaning of the church and use it for the right direction so that the Korean church can continue to spread the gospel and extend the Kingdom of God.

⁶⁹ Hun-Tae Chang, "Mission of Reformer Calvin", *Evangelical Missiology* 40 [Bokeumgwa Seongyo] (2017): 198-208.

⁷⁰ Kyung-Sik Pae, "The Meaning of the Ecclesiology of J. Calvin in Reference to the Korean Church", *Korean Journal of Systematic Theology* 26 [Hankuk Jojikhak Nonchong] (2010): 218-129.

The Korean Presbyterian church plays a significant part among the entire group of Protestant churches in Korea. Therefore, the role played by the church in the Korean society and in the realm of religion is crucial because it represents, more or less, the entire Korean church. These circumstances naturally ask the church to maintain a firm ecclesiology and be a true Church. Calvin's ecclesiology is not a complete and final historical outcome but is the task for the church to move forward. The Korean Presbyterian church should put this into practice in the society by reforming its false nature, because the church is to be always reformed beyond time and locality: *ecclesia reformata semper reformanda est!*

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