

Revitalizing Ecological Vocation: Transformative Ecological Practices in South Korean Churches

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This article examines the role of the Protestant church in addressing the environmental crisis in South Korea. The predominant evangelical church—with its focus on the prosperity gospel and neoliberal values such as capitalism, individualization, and privatization—often hinders the development of practices that promote social change, including ecological justice. This article argues for a theological reevaluation of human vocation as represented in Genesis 1 and 2, advocating for a revitalization of human vocation as stewards who integrate ecological faith and recognize humans as part of nature. By examining the Beautiful Presbyterian Church as a model, the paper suggests three ecological practices for all churches: sustainability, mutual living, and earth justice.

Introduction

Over the past three years, South Korea has experienced a significant surge in its annual average temperature, increasing by approximately 2 degrees Celsius, according to data reported by Statista Research (EDGAR/JRC 2025). The rapid economic growth following the Korean War (1950–1953), often referred to as “The Miracle on the Han River,” has created fiscal opportunities and substantial environmental challenges. The heightened levels of pollution have resulted in severe environmental repercussions, including deforestation, the degradation of wetlands, a decline in agricultural productivity, climate change, and a reduction in water supply. These environmental issues underscore the complex interplay between economic development and environmental sustainability in South Korea.

Amid South Korea’s escalating environmental crisis, a study conducted by the Anti-Corruption and Civil Rights Commission in July 2021 revealed that 98.8 % of respondents perceived environmental pollution as either severe or very severe. Conversely, only 2.2 % of respondents considered environmental pollution not to be severe (Anti-Corruption 2021). This data evinces how South Koreans are keenly aware of environmental crises. Despite the heightened environmental awareness and con-

sciousness among the public, including various congregations, Korean Christianity appears to deprioritize the climate crisis. In other words, congregational practices do not seem to be interconnected with environmental issues, which contrasts with the public’s high awareness of environmental pollution in South Korea.

Instead, the Korean faith community, particularly evangelical churches, tends to emphasize personal spiritual growth and the communal development of their congregations through evangelical practices. For instance, a visit to a typical Korean Protestant church during its Sunday worship service, or participation in congregational activities, will likely reveal sermons focused on themes such as the life of faith, spiritual disciplines, the good news, and communal aspects of church life. Church activities often include Bible studies, prayer meetings, community volunteering, and various religious initiatives aimed at evangelization. However, it is challenging to find sermons or religious practices that address ecological crises as common elements within the general ecclesial context, despite the public’s high level of concern regarding the ecological crisis in South Korea.

This article addresses this critical question: “Why have Korean Protestant churches focused predominantly on the evangelical growth of individu-

als and communities rather than addressing the ecological crisis in the Anthropocene?” In examining this issue, the article critiques Korean Protestant churches for their negligence of the climate crisis, despite heightened social awareness of environmental pollution.

By analyzing the historical development of the Korean Protestant church into its current evangelical form, this paper reveals how its explosive growth was accompanied by the adoption of neoliberal values, including capitalism, individualization, and privatization. These values were often pursued at the expense of addressing environmental concerns. Consequently, the Korean Protestant church frequently fails to become a life-giving community for all creation, including non-Christians and the natural environment. “God in Christ promises abundant life for all creation” (Bass and Dykstra 2008, 1). The Korean Protestant church is poised to become a life-giving community, serving as an agent of God to lead all of creation to an abundant life.

The evangelical Korean church, which prioritizes the promotion of the prosperity gospel aligned with neoliberal values such as capitalism, individualization, and privatization, is unaware of ecological justice, and this lack of awareness is prohibiting it from becoming an agent of ecological justice. Addressing this imperative necessitates a theological reflection on the human vocation as portrayed in Genesis 1 and 2—specifically as priests and farmers—a concept that has long been integral to Christian practice. Rediscovering stewardship as the human vocation, particularly within the context of the Korean Protestant church, enables it to cultivate an ecological faith that emphasizes coexistence and mutual living with all creation. Drawing on practical wisdom gleaned from the Beautiful Presbyterian Church as a teaching model through qualitative research, this paper explores three ecological practices: 1) sustainability, 2) mutual living, and 3) earth justice.

Environmental Implications of the South Korean Evangelical Church

The South Korean church focuses on each individual’s spiritual growth, referred to as Christian spirituality, and the quantitative growth of congregations through evangelical practices. As for South Korean Christianity, it has adopted an evangelical approach rather than engaging in social change.

Helen Jin Kim, a historian of Christianity, explains that South Korean Christianity grew from less than 5 % to nearly 20 % of the population by 1980 during the Cold War era, reflecting the long evangelical influence on Korean Christianity (Kim 2022, 16). Kim analyzes how the term “evangelical” in South Korea is defined in opposition to social engagement and emphasizes “individual conversion as a means for social change” (Kim 2022, 157). The evangelical practice of the churches predisposes congregations to respond to ecological crises that can have detrimental effects on the environment in the Anthropocene.

The evangelical Korean churches have not acted as stalwart agents for ecological justice, but instead have promoted the prosperity gospel, based on neoliberal values such as capitalism, individualization, and privatization. Riding the train of rapid economic growth, the evangelical Korean churches often prioritize the quantitative growth of the church community.

These churches have aligned themselves with the logic of global capitalism (Lee 2007, 394). For practical reasons, the primary measures of ministers’ quality and the integrity of their proclamations are based on quantitative factors, such as church membership growth, the number of church attendees, and the physical size of church buildings (Lee 2007, 394). Ministers are required to ensure the quantitative growth of the congregation as well as the size of the church. Upon reflection, my effectiveness as a minister was often assessed based on the number of congregation attendees and the growth of the educational ministry under my leadership.

Within the capitalistic framework of church ministry and alongside the evangelical prosperity gospel, the church practices and encourages congregations to pursue individual well-being and material wealth. South Korean theologian Kyu Tae Son argues that South Korean churches have become exceedingly conservative and deeply immersed in a capitalistic, success-oriented, and prosperity gospel mindset (Son 2010, 202). Consequently, most South Korean churches have focused exclusively on spiritual salvation, often neglecting community solidarity, social responsibility, and service (Son 2010, 202).

In its pursuit of neoliberal values, the evangelical church in South Korea often focuses primarily on its own congregation while neglecting broader concerns for all of creation, including non-Christians, animals, and the biosphere. Hochul Kwak high-



lights that, from an ecological perspective, many churches in South Korea do not prioritize environmental considerations during construction, often opting for less sustainable building methods due to financial constraints (Kwak 2019, 13).

An illustrative example of this lack of environmental consideration is the widespread practice of installing red neon crosses on church towers ostensibly for evangelistic purposes and driven by a competitive desire to outshine other churches. Unfortunately, this practice inadvertently contributes to problems such as light pollution and unnecessary energy consumption. The financial investment in such evangelistic efforts in South Korea exceeds 1.0 billion won monthly, nearing 20 billion won annually, just for illuminating these crosses (Lee 2011). While many non-Christians argue that these red neon crosses disrupt their well-being, such as their sleep quality, evangelical churches assert they are not liable for any such disturbances, as the cross remains a fundamental symbol of their faith.

As South Korea is prone to powerful typhoons, these neon crosses can pose public hazards. In 2019, steeples from several Protestant churches, including some in Changdong City, Dobong Province, collapsed due to strong winds and obstructed streets and caused localized power outages after falling onto power lines (Hyun 2019). Despite these dangers and ecological concerns, the majority of churches continue to install red neon crosses on their towers for evangelistic purposes.

Last but not least, individual Protestant churches, especially megachurches and similar well-established ones, have taken the lead in constructing numerous retreat facilities in remote mountainous and rural areas. These retreat centers and churches are often established with a strong emphasis on privatization, justified by the pursuit of salvation and personal blessings (Lee 2007, 397). Unfortunately, the evangelical approach to practicing faith in Korean churches, influenced by the teachings of the prosperity gospel and the pursuit of neoliberal values, has inadvertently worsened environmental issues in these rural and mountainous regions.

Theological Reflections on Human Vocation

Theological reflections on human vocation have the potential to address the inadequate response to ecological issues in the evangelical churches during the

Anthropocene era. The Korean church has traditionally interpreted human vocation primarily through the lens of priesthood, as depicted in Genesis 1. Specifically, Genesis 1:28 grants “dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over every living thing that moves upon the earth,” and this has shaped the theological assumption of unilateral human dominion over creation, both in theory and practice. Biblical theologian Theodore Hiebert argues that the image of human dominion and distinctiveness in Genesis 1 reflects Israel’s self-understanding as a priesthood (Hiebert 2000, 138).

Undeniably, the idea of human dominion over nature as a primary human vocation can be traced back to the Judeo-Christian tradition and has been widely accepted. Lynn White Jr. argued that the Judeo-Christian tradition was the main factor behind the contemporary environmental crisis (White 1967, 1250–55). Building on this renowned argument, the prioritization of human vocation as a form of priesthood gave humans the authority to “have dominion” over the earth and its inhabitants, leading to exploitative practices that have resulted in our current ecological crisis. In particular, the South Korean church, embracing neoliberal values, attributes authority and human power to justify itself as a priesthood, thereby asserting Christian dominance over all creation. This interpretation of the human vocation as a priesthood allows the South Korean evangelical church to cultivate an anthropocentric faith, emphasizing dominion over nature, as previously discussed regarding the environmental implications of the South Korean church.

In addition, the priesthood as a human vocation, prevalently embedded within the Korean evangelical church, may inadvertently contribute to the exploitation of nature and the formation of dualistic perspectives: church versus world, evangelicalism versus social change, sacred versus profane, Christian versus non-Christian, and human versus nature. These dualistic perspectives, already prevalent in traditional Christian theology influenced by Greek philosophy, have been further entrenched by Korean evangelism. This entrenchment has led to detrimental effects, including environmental degradation, as the emphasis on church growth and expansion has overshadowed a holistic view of all creation, including non-Christians and nature as sacred. Korean evangelical activities aimed at increasing the quantitative number of congregations hinder the interconnection and intertwining of their faith with the ecological crisis. Furthermore,

in the context of South Korea, which features a multi-religious landscape, the church scarcely works in solidarity through ecumenical and interreligious dialogues toward ecological justice.

All of God's creation is deemed sacred (Moore 1998, 145), encompassing not only humanity, including non-Christians, but also the biosphere. It is incumbent upon the evangelical Korean faith communities to acknowledge this sanctity and to live out a faith that fosters the flourishing of all life. As an initial step toward this end, this paper proposes a rediscovery of the ecological vocation of humans as farmers, framed within the concept of stewardship. The other metaphor of human vocation as a farmer, as presented in Genesis 2 and 3, has frequently been overlooked and insufficiently represented within the Korean church. In the Anthropocene era, it is crucial for the Korean church to rediscover and embrace the human vocation as farmers.

In Genesis 2 and 3, the Yahwist's depiction of human vocation, with a distinct emphasis on God's name as Yahweh, offers a unique perspective compared to the priestly image in Genesis 1. Here, human vocation is portrayed as that of a farmer, situated within the specific context of the Mediterranean highlands (Hiebert 2000, 139). In this narrative, human beings are not set apart from other forms of life but are intimately linked with them. Plants and animals are not created separately but emerge from the same arable soil from which the first human was formed (Hiebert 2000, 140). This understanding of human vocation as a farmer is further underscored by the task that God assigns to the first human: to till and cultivate the soil of the garden (Hiebert 2000, 140). When viewed through an agricultural lens, human vocation takes on the role of a servant rather than a master of the land.

However, the concept of stewardship needs to be evaluated to determine whether it reflects a human-centric worldview. Recognizing humans as an integral part of nature underscores interdependence with the earth rather than dominion over it, as emphasized by Pamela McCarroll:

Until the living web of humanity can be conceptualized within the larger living web of creation, our research and practice cannot help but serve human-centric ways of being in the world. The methodological emphasis on humans at the center eclipses paradigms and sources of knowledge outside a human lens and ultimately re-inscribes and normalizes human-centricity, the fundamental cause of the environmental crisis (McCarroll 2020, 36).

Pamela McCarroll underscores the notion that humans maintain a reciprocal relationship with the land, endeavoring to work in harmony with it while acknowledging their interconnectedness with the natural world. The development of stewardship, involving roles as stewards, custodians, and cohabitants, can be fostered through a theological framework that positions humans as integral components of nature, transcending a solely anthropocentric view. By recognizing their intrinsic connection to nature, humans can align their actions to meet the requirements and honor the limitations set by the overarching natural system that encompasses all its constituents. Consequently, humans are compelled to assess their activities in the light of the vitality of the broader biotic community to which they belong (Hiebert 2000, 151).

In proposing an ecological response for the Anthropocene era, Hye Ran Kim introduces the concept of "sang saeng" (相生), which translates as mutual life or co-living. This term signifies a deeply interdependent mode of existence (Kim-Cragg 2018, 84). The concept of sang saeng provides practical wisdom for Korean churches by encouraging them to critique and move beyond androcentric religious practices and worldviews. Instead, it promotes a path toward coexistence and mutual living with all aspects of creation.

Rediscovering the human vocation as a farmer to care for nature and recognizing that humans are a part of nature is crucial. Recognizing humans as an integral part of nature underscores interdependence with the earth rather than dominion over it. We, as Christians, must minister with the Earth to reestablish "an independent and intersubjective relationship between the human family and the rest of creation" (Moore 2022, 9).

Cultivating Ecological Faith: Beautiful Presbyterian Church as a Teaching Model

In the context of the evangelical church in South Korea, there is a renewed emphasis on the ecological vocation of farmers, aimed at reestablishing a profound connection between congregations and ecological faith. Jennifer Ayres, in her book *Inhabitanace*, delineates ecological faith and proposes its cultivation for the faith communities. Ecological faith is defined as:



A faith that turns on the capacities necessary to inhabit God's world well. It is a way of life seeking to becoming loving, just, and responsible members of God's household. Defining and contextualizing ecological faith thus requires attention to three dynamics: the location and architecture of the ecological household in which humans belong; meaning of human life in this habitat; and the art, disposition, and practice of inhabiting this household. The way of ecological faith is, in short, faithful and responsible inhabitation. (Ayres 2019, 10)

Building on Ayres' insightful perspective of ecological faith, ecological practices within evangelical Korean churches necessitate a reevaluation of their place and role within the ecological framework to which Christians are intrinsically connected. Amid the climate crisis, these practices should evoke a profound sense of urgency, compelling the South Korean church to address such challenges with compassion and respect for nature, acknowledging its interconnected existence and moving beyond neoliberal ideologies. These endeavors should encompass community engagement, collective action, collaborative initiatives, and cooperative ventures aimed at preserving shared resources locally and globally, guided by the tenets of agrarian faith (Wirzba 2022, 22).

Given the church's central role in cultivating the human vocation as farmers and guiding congregations toward ecological formation and transformation, collaborative and communal practices of faith play a pivotal role in fostering ecological faith and practical ecological wisdom. These efforts should serve not only to educate, nurture, and transform church pastoral leadership and the congregation but also to promote coexistence with all creations, including non-believers, and the non-human elements of the natural world. Additionally, practical wisdom can be derived from ecological perspectives found in diverse religions such as Buddhism and Donghak, as well as from the indigenous practical wisdom of our ancestors. Although these insights may have receded from prominence, they still have the potential to contribute significantly to the flourishing of all creation.

In the pursuit of an ecological church in South Korea and the rediscovery of its ecological vocation, the Beautiful Presbyterian Church located in South Korea serves as a teaching model for what an ecologically focused Korean congregation might emulate. This church stands out as a faith community that actively integrates ecological principles, anchored in the cultivation of ecological vocation for

mutual living with the Earth. To investigate this church, I conducted an interview with the senior pastor, Gu Teak Jeon, visited the church in 2023, and reviewed articles and reports related to this church's ecological justice initiatives.

The Beautiful Presbyterian Church in Gimpo City is situated near Seoul amid an agricultural landscape and diverges from mainstream churches by emphasizing the cultivation of ecological faith. Unlike counterparts driven by neoliberal principles—capitalism, individualism, and privatization—aimed at congregation growth, this church prioritizes cultivating ecological faith within its community. The active engagements of approximately 1,400–1,500 congregants underscore the cohesive and committed community dedicated to advancing the church's ecological mission.

In my interview with Senior Pastor Jeon, he emphasized the theological motivation behind the construction of an ecological church by citing John 3:16. According to Reverend Jeon, "For God so loved the world" reflects God's love for all creation, including nature, insects, and the universe, as articulated by Craig Dykstra, who emphasizes that "God in Christ promises abundant life for all creation (Bass and Dykstra 2008, 1)." This theological framework laid the foundation of the mission of ministry focusing on ecological practice of faith, aiming to remind the Korean church of its responsibility as human vocation rather than solely on Christians. Reflecting this ecological vision, the congregation demonstrates its commitment through three main practices: (1) sustainability, (2) mutual living, and (3) earth justice.

The Practice of Sustainability

The Beautiful Presbyterian Church exemplifies a commitment to architectural sustainability through its construction practices. The development of the church was marked by a meticulous and patient dedication to sustainable principles, as evidenced by the two-year construction period and the intermittent expansion approach employed, wherein additional construction occurred as funds became available (Na and Choi, 2021).

The church's interior design reflects eco-friendly principles, incorporating innovative techniques such as cement panel flooring integrated with cultivated microorganisms to mitigate heavy metal emissions. The installation of strategically placed sliding windows further enhances natural ventilation, thereby improving the building's overall ener-

gy efficiency. This approach to architectural sustainability serves as a significant counter-narrative to the traditionally anthropocentric perspectives often associated with the construction of conventional churches in South Korea.

Furthermore, the Beautiful Presbyterian Church actively integrates sustainable practices into its daily operations and extends a welcoming gesture to individuals of all faiths. Notably, the church has installed a food waste collection bin in front of its gates, available to both congregants and local residents for the purpose of composting. This initiative exemplifies the church's commitment to sustainability and reflects a broader stewardship of the environment. The church's inclusive approach also serves as an invitation to non-Christians, underscoring its dedication to environmental responsibility while fostering a sense of community beyond religious boundaries.

The Practice of Mutual Living

Using the cost savings achieved during the church's construction, the congregation established an environmental center designed to serve as a hub for ministering with the earth. The center features raised gardens and a greenhouse, providing congregants with opportunities to cultivate herbs and vegetables, thereby nurturing their ecological faith. It also includes a dedicated hydroponic cultivation area for more advanced agricultural practices. The center is also home to a substantial population of over 1,200 chickens, demonstrating a commitment to sustainable food production.

The ecological ministry of the Beautiful Presbyterian Church extends beyond teaching farming skills; it also advocates for a profound shift from the human vocation of priesthood, which is ingrained in an anthropocentric worldview, to an ecological vocation as stewardship emphasizing the importance of an agrarian faith that coexists with nature, and even becomes a part of nature.

In line with this approach, many congregants actively engage in urban agriculture. This practice involves multiple generations, with the third generation continuing to nurture their ecological faith, which is rooted in love for others, respect for nature, and reverence for all living creatures. The organic harvest from the farm is regularly shared with non-Christians, and the farm's organic products are sold at affordable prices. Reverend Jeon noted that this initiative has even encouraged local Buddhist

monks to purchase organic food, thereby fostering potential interreligious dialogue.

The Practice of Earth Justice

The Beautiful Presbyterian Church actively engages in restorative environmental intervention. For the past seven years, the congregation has consistently put effective microorganisms (EM) mixed with baseball-sized dirt clods in the upper reaches of the Geyang Stream on a weekly basis. Reverend Jeon has spearheaded research and the use of EM, a group of beneficial microorganisms that are harmless to humans and animals. This ecological intervention aims to foster coexistence with the earth and integrate into the natural environment. As a result of these efforts, the water quality in the river has significantly improved to Grade 3 levels (Jin 2021). The church's unwavering commitment to environmental justice not only contributes to the restoration of polluted environments but also nurtures their ecological faith in alignment with their ecological vocation.

Their active engagement in ecological justice has not only impacted the city but also brought about a transformation within the church community. It has reshaped their perception of the church, contrasting it with evangelical churches that prioritize neoliberal values. Active participants within the congregation have undergone a transformation that mirrors the lessons learned from nature. Rather than attempting to dominate nature, humans should embrace the role of caretakers and stewards by recognizing their responsibility as an integral part of the biosphere.

Conclusion

In the Anthropocene, the evangelical churches in South Korea need to reimagine their practice of faith to encompass all creation that promotes abundance. Despite the challenges faced by evangelical churches in terms of their growth, an ecologically grounded reimagining of the practice of faith can offer an alternative path for their congregations, non-Christians, and nature. Shifting away from the established patterns of values and lifestyles associated with neoliberalism is no easy task. However, along with humility and consistent efforts on earth justice, rediscovering human vocation as stewardship in the contemporary world, the evangelical Ko-

rean church can be a transformative agent as a stewardship itself into an active embodiment of Christ for all creation.

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