

The Holy Spirit and New Marginality

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Last summer I visited both Korea and Japan and had the opportunity to interview a group of women preachers in each country. In addition, I collected their biographies, sermons, and other writings. The analysis of these interviews and materials reveals that the particular socio-cultural and political situations of both countries have influenced the formation of the women preachers' identities and challenged them with special roles for their communities of faith and larger societies. The lives of women preachers in Korea and Japan are well explained theologically by the term "marginality." They live as "new marginal people" in their societies, individuals who are invited to participate in the transforming work of the Holy Spirit. Their new marginality provides a hermeneutical lens for reading the experience of the Holy Spirit in Acts 1 and 2.

Preaching on the New Margin

Generally speaking, women in Asia live in more sexist societies than women in the United States and other western countries. The traditional patriarchal cultures of Asia tend to denigrate women and limit their primary roles to serving their families and in-laws. Korea and Japan are no exception to this generalization. Because of their gender, the women of these two countries live on the margin as second-class citizens. The women preachers in both countries experience double marginality. Not only are they marginalized in the secular world dominated by a traditional sexist mentality, but they are also marginalized in the world of the Church dominated by an institutionalized patriarchal system. In general, women preachers are discriminated against by congregations and the male clergy, both of which are long accustomed to traditional sexist attitudes. Consequently, women preachers find themselves pushed off to the margins of the ecclesial structure and ministerial fields. Most female preachers in Korea and Japan do their ministries in orphanages, nursing homes, prisons, and small churches in the countryside or in poor neighborhoods, all areas that have been abandoned or have been given little attention by society in general or by the Church.¹

In this situation, Asian women's special calling to the public ministry of the Word and Sacrament is indeed a big challenge for them because they must leave behind the traditional norms, expectations, and life values in society. Because responding to this special calling under these circumstances is not easy, their decisions to become preachers are often made by the intervention of the irresistible power of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit constantly invites them in many different ways to work together for the creation of a new world. Eventually, they cannot help but obey the calling. Thus, for Asian female preachers, the Holy Spirit is the source of their new lives. The Spirit gives the Asian female preachers creative and dynamic energy that brings about something new beyond their rational thinking and common sense. Like *qi*, which denotes "the life force that is present in all living organisms,"² the Holy Spirit is energy penetrating the universe, humanity, and nature. However, the Holy Spirit is more than *qi*, for the Spirit of God is not a neutral entity but the subject of new creation. The

power of the Holy Spirit is transforming, renewing, and creative. The Spirit transforms the old order of the world and creates a new reality in human life beyond our imagination.

Asian female preachers are Spirit-led people who respond to the initiating grace of the Spirit as an invitation to the work of the Spirit. The Spirit liberates them from the traditional expectations of women's roles and changes them into new marginal people. The Spirit of God comes to their ministerial places where oppression and self-alienation are present and transforms their marginal places into "a new and creative core"³ where a new reality emerges. Through the power of the Spirit, they live in the new margin, not as victims of centrality pushed off to the periphery by the dominant masculine group, but as God's partners in a new creative center where the Spirit dwells and acts for the wholeness of God.

In the new margin, Asian female preachers not only see the presence of the negative reality of marginality but also experience the transforming power of the Spirit in the midst of an oppressive patriarchal culture. Therefore, the new margin involves two different worlds—the world of self-alienation from the central group of society in a traditional sexist culture and the world of divine promise. In the new margin, female preachers hear not only the cries of the victims of violence against women and children, the poor and the sick but also the cries of the Spirit for these victims. Consequently, they understand the calling to preach as a calling to live in solidarity with the oppressed and the weak. In the new margin, female preachers live with the Spirit and are empowered to preach the liberation of the poor, the brokenhearted, the oppressed, the blind, and the bruised. The message proclaimed from the new margin is about "peace against peace," which is not a peace that the dominant group of centrality determines but the peace of God, "the harmonious order initiated by God's grace and acclaimed by the people through their imitation of [God's] righteousness and compassion in their relations to all people."⁴ The common goal of this preaching is to bring "shalom," the gift of wholeness, to our world of chaos.⁵

Wha Soon Cho is a Korean female preacher who has lived the life of a new marginalized person. During the 1970's and 80's when Korea was under a military dictatorship, Cho preached courageously against the evil government and stood for powerless female workers who were being exploited by the inhumane capitalist company owners and the government officials. Because of her liberating message for the oppressed, she was jailed many times. Nevertheless, Cho continued to struggle for the weak and the powerless, to create a new world of peace and justice in Korea.⁶ The autobiography of the Japanese preacher Yoshiko Isshiki illustrates another example of the life of a new marginalized person. Isshiki appealed to her people to repent their national sins: colonial imperialism, militarism, and the idolatry worship of the emperor. She preached messages of reconciliation between God and humanity by confessing her nation's sins to God and other Asian countries. She said, "No matter what society says or does, we [Japanese Christian women] stand on the side of truth."⁷ Through preaching, Cho, Isshiki, and other Asian female preachers have continued the transforming work of the Spirit by inviting their congregations to the new margin, to play a role as coworkers of the Holy Spirit in reconciling God and humanity toward the wholeness of God.

Acts 1 and 2 also share a story of new marginalized people. Like Asian female preachers, the early Christian preachers described in the Bible experienced the

irresistible power of the Spirit and lived a life of new marginality. On the one hand, Asian female preachers' experiences provide insight into the gospel of the risen Christ as the gospel of new marginality. On the other hand, the interpretation of Acts 1 and 2 from the perspective of new marginality offers a theological and biblical foundation to better understand Asian female preaching as a gift of the Holy Spirit.

The Gospel of New Marginality

At the beginning of Acts, Luke reports that before ascending, the risen Christ gave his followers, who were marginalized in the Roman empire, the commission that they should receive the Holy Spirit and be his witness "to the end of the earth" (Acts 1:1-11). The period in which Jesus lived and Luke wrote the Gospel of Jesus Christ and the history of the primitive church is known as the *Pax Romana*, the Roman peace. Seneca first used the term the *Pax Romana* to celebrate Augustus, who had brought war to an end and brought peace to his empire. The *Pax Romana* was gained and maintained by military force with streams of blood and tears. It was a peace determined from above, which was the political goal of the Roman emperor, his most senior officials, the upper class of Rome, and the indigenous upper class in the provinces of the Roman empire, who wanted to preserve their vested interests and privileges. From below, however, the *Pax Romana* had an impact on the many nameless people whose immeasurable tears and suffering were ignored. For non-Roman citizens, the Roman peace had to be paid for by taxes, tolls, offerings, tributes, and levies. The imperial monopoly of the Roman rule exploited virtually all the provinces universally, and as a result, the ordinary population suffered severe poverty. In the provinces, the emperor was worshipped as a god and forced the people to show their religious and political loyalty toward the Roman empire.⁸

Jesus of Nazareth was born in the period of the *Pax Romana* as a marginalized person ethnically, socio-politically, and economically. However, Luke identified Jesus as a new marginalized person who had lived in and with the Holy Spirit. According to Luke, Jesus was born of the Spirit (1:26-38), received the gift of the Spirit at his baptism (3:22), and was filled with the Spirit during his public ministry (cf. 10:21). He proclaimed and taught a new world in contrary to the *Pax Romana* and worked miracles as signs of the coming kingdom. In the eyes of the Roman provincial administrators, Jesus was a rebel who endangered the existing Roman peace. His identity as a new marginalized person was a threat to the status quo of the Roman Empire. Consequently, he was executed on the cross by the dominant group of centrality, a victim of violence perpetuated in the name of the *Pax Romana*.

However, Jesus' marginality was the "new and creative core" with which God worked. Through his resurrection, Jesus became the beginning of the new ages. The reality of the crucified and risen Jesus Christ manifested itself in the triumphant power that broke the old age. In the life and ministry of Jesus, God's Spirit was made manifest for the very first time. Through the risen Christ, the Spirit is given to the Church because the risen Christ is the Spirit. Thus, "either the Spirit or the risen Lord can be referred to interchangeably (compare Luke 12:12 with 21:5, Acts 10:14 with 19 and 16:7)."⁹ The gospel of the risen Christ is the gospel of the Spirit, the creative and dynamic power of new marginality. Therefore, the commission of Jesus' followers to witness the risen Christ is a commission to witness the creative and transforming

power of the Spirit in Jesus Christ. To witness the risen Christ is to preach the beginning of a new era bringing forth real peace that is totally different from the *Pax Romana*.

Considering the socio-political context of the *Pax Romana*, it must have been a tremendously heavy burden for Jesus' followers, who lived a marginalized life in the Roman Empire, to preach the Gospel of the risen Christ. The gospel of the risen Christ was not only "a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles" (1 Corinthians 1:23) but also a threat to the dominant central group of society. The listeners would have either scorned the message proclaimed by the marginalized people or punished them as the rebels who disturbed the Roman peace. It is no wonder, then, that the room in Jerusalem where Jesus' followers gathered on the day of Pentecost (Acts 2:1) might have been filled with a heavy mood. Rather than missing their master who ascended into heaven, leaving them alone on earth, or sharing the beautiful memories of him while they had been with him, the followers must have been fearful and anxious about what to do with their master's final commission, preaching the gospel of the risen Christ against the *Pax Romana*.

New Preaching: A Gift of the Holy Spirit

Acts 2:2-4 dramatically describes what happened among those who were afraid. The forceful power of the Spirit occupied the room like "the rush of a violent wind," and "divided tongues, as of fire" rested on each of those who had gathered in the room. They were seized and possessed by something overwhelmingly powerful at the level of unconscious depth. The Spirit-filled people began to speak in other languages, not by their will but by the unpredictable and irresistible power of the divine Spirit. Jung Young Lee explains this ecstatic experience as "a sudden liberation of self from ordinary consciousness. It is the sacred moment of meeting the divine in a sudden burst of the Spirit."¹⁰ When we experience ecstasy, we become the Spirit, which takes over our consciousness, and part of the divine, for the Spirit is God just as God is the Spirit. This experience renews and transforms us.

Although the experience of Pentecost was momentary, its impact was enormous because the ecstatic experience of outpouring of the Spirit was a decisive eschatological event for the crowd of Jesus' followers. The one common language is a phenomenon of the Last Age (Isaiah 66:18-19). Through the ecstatic experience, the crowd of Jesus' followers glimpsed the reign of God. They had a taste of the new heaven and earth in which there are no barriers created by such external factors as language, gender, class, and race. This visible and ascertainable manifestation of the Spirit brought the crowd of Jesus' followers to a new margin, a tangent line where a new world begins. Their momentary experience reoriented their identity and life values. The Spirit was the new core, the powerful center of their new marginality. They no longer remained in the margin as the victims of centrality. They no longer feared the world and its hostility. Rather than withdrawing from the world and its hostility by remaining behind a locked door, they went forth to deal with the world. The intimidated disciples turned into free witnesses to Jesus Christ. The Spirit of God manifested by Jesus in casting out demons or healing diseases was now in the inspired speech of those who witnessed Jesus.

As a new marginalized person, Peter, filled with the Spirit, stood up and preached the gospel of the risen Christ, beginning with the words taken from the prophet Joel:

“In the last days, it will be, God declares,
that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh,
and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy,
and your young men shall see visions,
and your old men shall dream dreams.
Even upon my slaves, both men and women,
in those days I will pour out my Spirit;
and they shall prophesy,
And I will show portents in the heaven above
and signs on the earth below, blood, and fire, and smoky mist. . .
Then every one who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.”
. . . Jesus of Nazareth, a man attested to you by God with deeds of power,
wonders, and signs that God did through him among you . . . you crucified
and killed by the hands of those outside the law. But God raised him up,
having freed him from death. . . Being therefore exalted at the right hand
of God, and having received from the father the promise of the Holy Spirit,
he has poured out his that you both see and hear. (NRSV, Acts 2:17-33)

The focus of Peter’s preaching was on forgiveness and reconciliation in Christ Jesus. Peter’s speech was a new preaching because it addressed peace against peace. Just as Jesus promised a new creation for the dispirited Jews under the yoke of Roman rule, so the new preaching proclaimed peace in the risen Christ, in contrast to the Roman peace. When this new message was delivered in the face of a hostile and persecuting world, the listeners were disturbed because its content was beyond their imagination. The peace that the new preaching proclaimed was a gift of God offered to the world unconditionally. It offered a new life, a new creation in which human beings reconciled with God and with nature. The peace God revealed on the day of Pentecost was a profound oneness with God in the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:33).

Cries of the oppressed and thirst for peace in our world are as serious as during the *Pax Romana*. The peace we yearn for includes not only harmony, order, security, and prosperity in our world but also a profound oneness with God, the wholeness, embracing and coming to terms with all that we are as human beings in the Spirit. God the Spirit that controls the order of the universe, transcending us while at the same time immanent in us, is the source of peace. The new preaching still invites us to be bearers of the Spirit and calls us to continue to preach the message of peace against peace, the wholeness of God. Asian female preachers are those who responded to the calling to preach this new message. Beyond twenty centuries apart, Asian women who have suffered violence, war, and abuse in the patriarchal world know how horrible the world without peace is and how important the message of the new preaching is.

Both the crowd of Jesus’ followers in Jerusalem on the day of Pentecost and female preachers in Asia today witness that those who experience the irresistible power of the Holy Spirit stand in the new margin. Those who once had a foretaste of the Kingdom of God do not go back but go forth to participate in the wholeness of God. The unpredictable and irresistible power of God transforms the old margin, a place of victims of centrality, to the new margin, a creative core where a new world emerges. The sudden and uncanny side of the Spirit’s activity changes the marginalized people into the new marginalized. The new marginalized people are partners of God the Spirit

who creates a harmonious peaceful kingdom. Through preaching, new marginalized people continue to invite their listeners to new margins, where the Holy Spirit dwells and acts, to work together to create a new world.

Notes

¹ See Eun Ok Kim, et al., *God! It's Time to Begin: Stories of Korean Female Evangelists* (Seoul, Korea: The Association of Korean Female Ministers, 1997).

² Pui-lan Kwok, "Images of God in the Chinese Context," in *Voices* 21, no. 2 (December 1998): 108. *Qi* is an Asian religious and philosophical concept which is translated into various terms in English such as "matter-energy," "breath," "vital force," or "psychophysiological power."

³ Jung Young Lee, *Marginality: the Key to Multicultural Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995), 60.

⁴ Paul D. Hanson, "War and Peace in the Hebrew Bible," *Interpretation* 38, no. 4 (October 1984): 356.

⁵ See Myung Ok Sung, ed., *From Magdalene To Jerusalem: Collections of Nineteen Korean Female Sermons* (Seoul, Korea: The Association of Korean Female Minister, 1999).

⁶ Wha Soon Cho, *Let the Weak Be Strong: A Woman's Struggle for Justice* (Bloomington, Indiana: Meyer Stone Books, 1988).

⁷ Yoshiko Isshiki, et al., *Women Moving Mountains: Feminist Theology in Japan* (Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia: Asian Women's Resource Centre for Culture and Theology, 2000), 1-34.

⁸ Klaus Wengst, *Pax Romana and the Peace of Jesus Christ* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987), 8-51.

⁹ Eduard Schweizer, *Spirit of God* (London: Adam and Charles Black, 1960), 39.

¹⁰ Jung Young Lee, *The Trinity in Asian Perspective* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996), 119.