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A Response to David S. Lim

Wonsuk Ma

1. Introduction

Dr. David S. Lim, a prominent New Testament scholar who is deeply involved in mission work in China, is exceptionally qualified to take a deep look at Cho's life, leadership, and his ministry. His recent involvement in the Oxford Centre for Mission Studies, Oxford, has encouraged him significantly to apply his theological insights to diverse mission settings, particularly in Asia. He is a well-informed evangelical scholar with an open mind toward other Christian traditions including Catholicism and Pentecostalism.

In this paper, his goal is very clear: to prove that Cho's charismatic leadership is the key to the unprecedented church growth achieved not only in his Yoido Full Gospel Church but throughout the wider church growth movement.

The main body consists of two major parts: the analysis of Cho's charismatic leadership, and its implications to church growth. The analysis follows four sub-categories that Lim brilliantly chooses (but without any reference, thus, making readers wonder if the categories are his own creation.) These categories are quite informative: supernatural *proficiency*, congenial *personality*, consistent *spirituality* and competent *ingenuity*. Although questions may be raised as to the legitimacy of the categorization, this set has served Lim's argument well.

For each of the major sections, some comments may be in order.

2. Charismatic Leadership Traits

In this lengthy section, Lim successfully argues that Cho's leadership style exhibits charismatic leadership. His analysis is

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not based on a leadership theory, but the categories he has created to examine Cho's leadership. In a more strict sense, Lim seems to argue that Cho's leadership can be labeled as "spiritual charismatic leadership." In fact, Lim's discussion has left a strong impression that each of the four categories of charismatic leadership can be developed into a full-length article in evaluating any charismatic leader including Cho.

In addition, Lim highlights unique achievements of Cho's charismatic leadership, as he proceeds in his discussion according to various categories. One of them is a careful combination of Cho's authoritative charismatic leadership and servant leadership. Lim exemplifies Cho's humility by his frequent confessions of his shortcomings. This indeed is an impressive aspect of his charismatic leadership, especially in an Asian setting where the acknowledgment of one's shortcoming is perceived as a weakness, something that a leader cannot afford to have in the eyes of his or her followers. Evidence of his vulnerability and transparency is also found in his willingness to take risk and responsibility throughout various developmental stages of the Yoido Full Gospel Church.

The second unique characteristic, thus, achievement, of Cho's charismatic leadership, as Lim rightly points out, is the empowering aspect of Cho's ministry and life. This aspect of his leadership has been best seen in his creative cell system. This almost anti-cultural move in a male dominant society has almost revolutionized several areas, and its socio-theological impact should be further studied. For instance, the clergy dominant concept of ministry was squarely challenged, and this is in accordance with the grass-roots nature of Pentecostal theology. As a consequence, the cell system has produced significant "empowerment" affecting many areas including the spiritual, cultural, societal and familial. (Lim's theological interest as observed in the past decade includes concepts such as "empowerment" and "servant," thus; he applies his theological categories in a ministerial setting.) Also Cho's empowering leadership has been historically exhibited through his mentoring role to a host of junior mega-church leaders. It is fair to surmise Cho's empowering charismatic leadership in two specific areas: delegation and mentoring. Personally speaking, these two topics should be carefully studied to present theological reasoning and practical applications for future spiritual leaders.

Third, Lim observes as a unique achievement of Cho's charismatic leadership something that every successful leader and organization struggles with: overcoming the institutionalizing bureaucracy. This is an area where many charismatic leaders

have failed. Thus, a charismatic leader must have an organizational and administrative ability. According to Lim, Cho's charismatic leadership has overcome this historic pitfall. Cho has been able to lead the Yoido Full Gospel Church and other ministries to grow into "open and creative" operations. In fact, although less acknowledged, this is perhaps one crucial area where Cho's charismatic leadership shines best. Lim attributes this success to Cho's constant creative initiatives and innovative approaches including the utilization of new technologies that have become available. This again is what the Pentecostal movement has developed as its trademark in its one hundred-year history.

Lim makes several important observations. First, his view is quite convincing that Cho is not just a practitioner of church growth, but also a substantial theorist. For the latter role, unlike theoretical leaders such as McGavran and Wagner, Cho has actually grown the largest church in the world and produced substantial material and programs to propagate the church growth idea. Second, Lim makes a passing reference to the role of prayer and fasting in Cho's church growth strategies. In my opinion, based on Cho's emphasis on this, the topic seems to be critical enough to be treated separately. Third, Lim highlights the contribution of Cho's "positive" message. Although there is no doubt that this is a hallmark of Cho's message, the concept is better expressed as "proactivity" as well conveyed in Korean. What Cho has confronted through his ministry is the traditional passive image of God and the Christian gospel. The emphasis on "good God" and belief in God's blessing are practical expressions of this theological conviction. Cho's proactive message should not be identified with the "positive belief" prevalent in North America several decades ago for theological and contextual reasons. This almost parallels with the allegation of Cho's message of blessing as "prosperity gospel."

There are several minor points that require further refinement or clarification. For instance, Cho's persistent boldness and visualization of faith appear to be more expressions of Cho's "step of faith" rather than a "given" by God as Lim categorizes. Also Cho's spiritual giftedness includes other charismata such as the word of knowledge through which he "sees" certain diseases healed, and this is publicly pronounced. Nonetheless, Lim is remarkably well informed, especially considering that only a fraction of Cho's books have been translated into English. His analysis is commendable, even though his categorization seems to require further refinement.

Now, having expounded upon various aspects of Cho's

charismatic leadership, a fundamental question remains unanswered: Is charismatic leadership the ideal type among other leadership styles? Does not charismatic leadership have its own weaknesses or so-called "dark side"? We all know too well that any misuse or abuse of charismatic leadership opportunity can result in a devastating situation. In an indirect way, Lim implies potential dangers of charismatic leadership. Nonetheless, it would have been more helpful to make a reference to other leadership styles, so that Lim does not have to create an impression that charismatic leadership is "the" leadership style that God uses. This broader context can place the successful charismatic leadership of Cho in perspective.

3. Implications of the Charismatic Leadership to Church Growth

In this section, Lim further elaborates on the contribution of Cho's charismatic leadership to church growth. Among his fine discussions, Lim shines bright in his theological discussion. (Yes, he is a trained theologian!) He draws his point from the multiplication potential of Cho's charismatic leadership. He definitely sees that Cho's empowering leadership has far greater potential than what has been realized. While appreciating Cho's remarkable achievement in church growth, he proposes church multiplication as an alternative to, and development of, the church growth model. This insight may have come from his theological conviction of the church as God's servant.

It is obvious that Lim is not uncritical of Cho's church growth model. In spite of many significant areas where Cho has exercised the empowering aspect of his charismatic leadership, Lim feels that "Cho's empowerment model seems to be not empowering enough!" What he sees is the potential role of the next generations of Cho who are to develop theological reflections of Cho's legacy. This can be compared with John Wesley's movement, which took Wesley's sermons, testimonies, diaries, and songs and established a fine theological and ecclesial system for succeeding generations. As Lim aptly says it, "Cho has served his generation excellently well with this God-endowed charismatic leadership gifts." This is not only a compliment for Cho, but also a challenge to his followers.

4. As Concluding

The overall impression is rather astonishing to note how well he is informed of the subject matter. Some times, he sounds like an observer-participant of Cho's ministry. Also his careful research based on the good combination of Lim's observation and substantiating references has enhanced the strength of the

paper. His evaluations of Cho and his ministry are objective, particularly coming from the careful observation of a non-western theologian and mission strategist. Since he is not a Pentecostal, he has no inherent obligation to throw a positive light on Cho.

Lim undertakes a courageous task, in spite of few references available on Cho. His bibliography reveals this deficiency, and the translation of Cho's important works appears to be an immediate and urgent task. If Lim is able to produce this fine reflection to bless the church at large, how much more impact would Cho and his ministry have, should there be sufficient number of Cho's titles available in English?

I personally join Lim's prayer for Cho and his ministry: "May God use Cho's exemplary charismatic leadership to inspire us to obey the Great Commission, to bear explosive witness among the nations, so that 'the end will come' (cf. Mt. 24:14)! Maranatha!" And I also offer my prayer that the coming generation will see an increased impact of Cho's life and ministry through continuing efforts of reflections. Only then, will Cho's ministry be truly the world's largest and best.

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