

A New Understanding of Minjung-Messianism

In the early 1990s people said, "there is a crisis in Minjung theology," or "the time of Minjung theology is fading away." More or less, it is true that the interest in Minjung theology is gradually decreasing both domestically and internationally. It is undeniable that Minjung theology has not been very active since the 1990s. There are several reasons for this phenomenon. I think the two main reasons are due to external and internal factors. The external reason is the collapsing of socialist countries and the internal reason is the theological problems within Minjung theology itself. I will examine Minjung-Messianism, one of theological problems of Minjung theology, and give an alternative rendering of Minjung-Messianism for Minjung theology. Minjung-Messianism is one of the representative theologies in Minjung theology. After I examine Minjung Messianism as it originated from Ahn Byung-Mu and Suh Nam-Dong (two fathers of Minjung theology), I will propose what I call Jesus-Messianism and the Messianic role of the Minjung. An untiring supporter of Minjung theology, J. Moltmann was surprised at the statement of Ahn Byung-Mu that 'the Lamb of God' in John 1:29 is not Jesus but the Minjung.¹

J. Moltmann thinks that Ahn Byung-Mu's thesis that the 'Minjung is Messiah' is improper and inconsistent from the context of John 1:29. J. Moltmann expected a reasonable explanation about Minjung-Messianism, but he could not get a satisfactory answer from Korean Minjung theologians. Therefore he did not pay attention to Minjung theology and withdrew from Minjung theology. I think many others withdraw from Minjung theology for the same reason. Therefore I would like to examine the Minjung-Messianism of Ahn Byung-Mu and Suh Nam-Dong and reformulate the Messianism of Minjung Theology.

I. Ahn Byung-Mu's Minjung-Messianism

Ahn Byung-Mu asserts that "Jesus is not the Messiah" by denying the traditional titles of Jesus such as 'Lord of redemption', 'Messiah', 'Son of God' and 'Son of Man'. Also, he does not admit that Jesus is a divine being. Ahn Byung-Mu says in his book *A Story on Minjung Theology*:

"We must start to cut off the vicious circle of revenge by the thought that the Minjung are suffering for the world. Through the suffering of Minjung for the world, the ultimate Kingdom of God and the reign of Messiah will be fulfilled. In this sense the Minjung are Messiah."²

He is preparing his work in Minjung-Messianism by saying "The Minjung are Messiah and Jesus is not the Messiah, Lord of redemption or Son of God." His Minjung-Messianism is based on John 1:29, Matthew 25:31-46 and Hebrews 13:12-13. Let's examine these texts one by one.

1. The Lamb of God is Minjung (John 1:29)

"The next day John saw Jesus coming toward him and said, 'Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!'"(John 1:29)

The primary text for the Minjung-Messianism of Ahn Byung-Mu is John 1:29. His Minjung-Messianism is described mainly in his book *A Story on Minjung Theology*. The logic of his Minjung-Messianism is that "the Lamb of God, who carries the sin of the world is the Minjung." For Ahn Byung-Mu the sin of world does not mean sin in the ethical-religious sense. Sin is rather political and economic inconsistency. We all ought to carry these political and economical inconsistencies and burdens, but in reality the Minjung alone carry these burdens and suffer instead of us. Therefore, the Minjung are "the Lamb of God who carry the sin of the world."

Two questions must be asked of him. First, does "sin" in John 1:29 mean only political and economic sin? Second, is the Lamb of God really the Minjung? Ahn Byung-Mu says that the sin of the world in John 1:29 refers to political and economical inconsistencies. Whenever he sees the suffering Minjung, he feels that the Minjung are carrying the sin of the world. It is certain that the Minjung are carrying the burdens of the world. Nevertheless, the sin of the world includes not only political and economic sin but also individual ethical-religious sin. The Greek word for sin, 'hamartia' primarily means individual sin towards God (Mark 1:5; Matt. 1:21; Acts 2:38; John 9:41; 15:22). In other words—sin in John 1:29 primarily means religious sin rather than political and economical sin.

Ahn Byung-Mu insists that "the Lamb of God" here does not mean Jesus the individual but rather the plural mass of the Minjung. However, the text in John 1:29 does not permit such an interpretation. First, the word 'Lamb' occurs 4 times in the New

Testament (John 1:29.36; Acts 8:32; 1 Peter 1:19) and the Lamb in all of these contexts refer to the sinless Jesus who suffered and died for us. Many scholars, such as O. Cullmann and R. Bultmann say that the Lamb in John 1:29 refers primarily the suffering servant of Yahweh in Isaiah 53 and reminds us of the Passover Lamb. Second, according to the context it is difficult to say that the Lamb in John 1:29 is the Minjung. In John 1:27, John the Baptist says, "He is the one who comes after me, the thongs of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie." In this context, it is obvious that 'He' here means one person, Jesus, not many persons, like the Minjung. The one person here is not anyone else but 'Jesus'. John the Baptist says here that Jesus is "the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world." John the Baptist mentions the pre-existence of Jesus in 1:30, "This is the one I meant when I said, 'A man who comes after me has surpassed me because he was before me.'" The mention of pre-existence does not fit in with the idea of the Minjung as the Lamb of God. In John 1:33 he says, "He will baptize with the Holy Spirit." If the Minjung are the Lamb of God, then the Minjung must baptize with the Holy Spirit. But the Minjung cannot baptize with the Holy Spirit. Therefore, from John 1:29 we can conclude that "the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world" is not the Minjung, but Jesus.

2. The Suffering Minjung are Messiah (Matt. 25:31-46)

Ahn Byung-Mu says that "a chain of Messianic volcanoes erupted as an active volcano in Jesus of Nazareth." The Christ event occurs not only with Jesus of Nazareth, but it occurs continuously in our history just like volcanic chains of eruption. In this sense Ahn Byung-Mu thinks that the event of Jesus does not have a unique and once for all quality. In other words, the event of Jesus is not different from other Minjung events in terms of quality. He gives an example of this from Matthew 25:31-46. He interprets this text as saying that "Christ exists among people who are in prison, poorly clothed, starving, poor or captive."³ For Ahn Byung-Mu these people are the Minjung and therefore "the Minjung are Christ."

But from the text we cannot say that these people are Christ Himself. In the text, Christ is the Lord and judge in the Last Judgment. The Minjung cannot become the Lord and judge in the Last Judgment. The text distinguishes between the Lord and the Minjung. The aim of the parable of the last Judgment is not to say that the Christ and the least of his brothers are same, but rather to say that we are to serve as Christ served. We should not confuse these two. This does not mean that Christ is simply absorbed into his disciples or the least of his brothers. The Christ here still acts as Lord and judge. As such He met them, the least of his brothers.

3) Participating in the Suffering of the Minjung

"And so Jesus also suffered outside the city gate to make the people holy through his own blood. Let us, then, go to him outside the camp, bearing the disgrace he bore"(Heb. 13:12-13).

Ahn Byung-Mu speaks concerning the meaning of Hebrews 13:12-13 as follows:

"Hebrews 13:13 says, 'Let us, then, go to him outside the camp, bearing the disgrace he bore'....It is shameful to visit Him who went out to the city gate. But Christ is existing in the place that is abandoned and alienated thoroughly from the world. Let us go out there. There is no Christ inside the city gate now. Christ does not exist in the places that people recognize."⁴

From Hebrews 13:12-13 Ahn Byung-Mu concludes that the one who was suffering outside of the city gate was not Jesus but the Minjung. However, verse 12 speaks about Jesus Christ's redemptive death and verse 13 exhorts the congregation: "Let us, then, go to him outside the camp, bearing the disgrace he bore." In this text 'he' and 'us' are clearly distinguished. 'Us' here indicates the Christian congregation and 'he' indicates Jesus. Verse 13 means that we should join in Christ's suffering through going out of city gate where He suffered, because we become holy through Christ's blood. We should not remove the difference between Christ and the Minjung and should not absorb Christ into the people. Definitely "the 'one' outside the camp" is Jesus Christ, not the Minjung. Hebrew 13:12-13 does not merge Jesus into the Minjung or absorb the Christ into Minjung. The Epistle to the Hebrews distinguishes between these two. As we have seen above, we cannot find any solid ground for Minjung-Messianism in John 1:29, Matt. 25:31-46 and Hebrews 13:12-13. We cannot find any other grounds for Minjung-Messianism in the Bible. Therefore, Minjung-Messianism as understood by Ahn Byung-Mu should be reconsidered.

II . Suh Nam-Dong's Minjung-Messianism

Suh Nam-Dong also argues that 'the Minjung are Messiah' but he recognizes Jesus as the Messiah unlike Ahn Byung-Mu. In this aspect, Suh Nam-Dong's Minjung-Messianism is different from that of Ahn Byung-Mu. Let's examine his Messianism.

1. Jesus is the Messiah (Christ)

1) True God-True man

Let's consider what Suh Nam-Dong says about Jesus:

"Jesus says his own words without relying on the law and God..... In this sense, He himself is God and true Man."⁵

"The God who comes to the poor, the oppressed is Jesus."⁶

"The purpose of the coming of God, who became human being, is to serve people wholly, not to be served by people."⁷

"Christian theology until today speaks of the transcendence of God, but Jesus' story speaks of God's incarnation."⁸

From these quotes of Suh Nam-Dong we see that he follows the traditional Christian doctrine which confesses Jesus as "true God, true Man" (*vere theos vere homo*).

2) Trinity

Suh Nam-Dong recognizes the trinity as follows:

"Chiliasm, which was removed from the Church after Constantine the great, reappears as the 3rd age of Holy Spirit as a variation by Joachim de Floris in the 12th century. Joachim de Floris does not understand the Trinity of Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit as diachronic three form, but as historical succession of ages of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit."⁹

"God developed his own existence like this. Through this gradual process of revelation the Son surpasses the Father and the Holy Spirit surpasses the Son—God is heading in an eschatological direction. So in the last days, God will pour out his Holy Spirit on all people. This is the ground for Minjung theology."¹⁰

3) The Messiah

Suh Nam-Dong comments on the Messiah as follows.

"Jesus, the resurrected, lives continually as their Messiah among the Minjung that are

oppressed and alienated socially and economically." ¹¹

"As the Bible promises, when the time is fulfilled and the Kingdom of Messiah comes...and if the Messiah invites me to the table of Communists, then I will be embarrassed a little and hesitate to take part in it."¹²

"If Messiah comes, all people belonging to Him, dead or alive, will be resurrected all together at once in the Kingdom of Messiah."¹³

"At every moment when the Kingdom of Messiah comes, we will be resurrected and connected to the resurrected Messiah."¹⁴

4) The Lord

"In the last supper the Lord took bread and said, "Take it. This is my body." This Lord is the same Lord who said, "I was hungry and you gave me something to eat."¹⁵

"From the first the evidence of the Lord's resurrection has been like that"¹⁶

"The resurrection is the resurrection in the Kingdom of God (Chilistic Kingdom)...When the Lord comes again, people who belong to Him will hear the calling of the trumpet...from that moment Kingdom of Messiah will begin."¹⁷

5) The Lord of Redemption

"If we suppose that Jesus died of infirmities of old age, or of disease such as gastric cancer, can we think we can get our redemption and liberation through his death?"¹⁸

"Jesus' death is not only a death for our redemption, but also a light which makes us to find death for our redemption in the world continually."¹⁹

From these sayings of Suh Nam-Dong, we can confirm that he recognizes Jesus as the true God, the incarnate God, Christ, Messiah, Lord, Lord of redemption and one person of the Trinity.

2. The Minjung Play a Role of the Messiah

Now I will examine Suh Nam-Dong's standpoint on the relationship of the Minjung and Messiah.

1) The Minjung are Messiah

Suh Nam-Dong says that the Minjung are Messiah too. But he expresses this idea seldom and with a different meaning than that of Ahn Byung-Mu.

"Participating in the suffering of the Minjung is the way of becoming a true human and a way of salvation. According to this understanding of salvation, the suffering Minjung are Messiah. Therefore the Minjung become the subject of history."²⁰

"Why are the suffering Minjung Messiah?...The Messiah approaches us as suffering neighbors in disguise. In this sense the Minjung are Messiah."²¹

Suh Nam-Dong's expression of "the Minjung are Messiah" does not mean that the Minjung are everyone's savior and guide to the Kingdom of God. In other words, Suh Nam-Dong's Minjung-Messianism differs from his own Jesus-Messianism. As seen above, for Suh Nam-Dong Jesus is the true God, the incarnate God, the Christ, the Messiah and the Lord of redemption. But for him, the Minjung are none of the above. Suh Nam-Dong does not say that the Minjung and Jesus are ontologically identical.

2) Minjung Play a Role of Messiah

In order to distinguish Jesus-Messianism from Minjung-Messianism, Suh Nam-Dong prefers to use vocabulary such as "the Messianic function of the Minjung," "the Messianic character of the Minjung" or "the Messianic role of the Minjung" rather than "the Minjung are Messiah." Then what is the Messianic role of the Minjung which Suh Nam-Dong has in mind? The Messianic role of the Minjung which Suh Nam-Dong speaks of does not mean that Minjung have any divine power to redeem other people. In order to explain the Messianic role of the Minjung, Suh Nam-Dong gives two Biblical examples. The first example is the man who fell into the hands of robbers in the parable of good Samaritan(Luke 10:30-35). Suh Nam-Dong interprets this story as follows.

"The man who suffered at the hands of the robbers plays a Messianic role, a role of Jesus Christ. If someone goes to the dying man and treats him, then he/she becomes a true human. But if he/she ignores him and passes by, then he/she becomes a beast.

Whether I make my sleeping human nature realize true humanity or not, depends on whether I hear the groan of the suffering man and help him or not."²²

"Minjung can play a role of Messiah because the suffering of the Minjung itself plays a role of Messiah. Participating in the suffering of the Minjung is the way to become a true human being and it is the way of salvation. If we understand Minjung-Messianism like this, then we can understand that the Minjung are Messiah. In this way the Minjung become the subject of a new age."²³

From these two statements of Suh Nam-Dong we can see that the Minjung can play a role of Messiah not because the Minjung have any supernatural divine power, but because paradoxically the Minjung are weak and suffer. Suh Nam-Dong explains a Messianic role of the Minjung in the parable of the last Judgment in Matt. 25. He argues that serving the stranger, people who are hungry, thirsty and sick is serving Jesus. Serving the poor and the oppressed is serving Jesus. In other words, he understands that the poor, the oppressed and the sick, that is, the Minjung, play a role of Jesus and Messiah. But, here is an important point we must not misunderstand. In the parable of the last Judgment, Jesus says that serving the Minjung means serving Jesus Himself. But in this parable the Minjung are not Jesus Himself. In other words, the Minjung and Jesus are not identical ontologically.

In sum, Suh Nam-Dong does say on occasion that the Minjung are Messiah, but he never means to say that the Minjung are the same as Jesus. Therefore, in order to distinguish Jesus-Messianism from Minjung-Messianism, Suh Nam-Dong prefers to use words such as "the Messianic function of Minjung," "the Messianic character of the Minjung," "the Messianic role of the Minjung" rather than saying that "the Minjung are Messiah."

III. Reaffirmation of Jesus-Messianism

As we have examined above, Ahn Byung-Mu denies the traditional titles of Jesus, such as: Lord of redemption, Messiah, Son of God and Son of Man. He openly declares that "Jesus is not the Messiah." He also does not believe that Jesus is God. On this basis, Ahn Byung-Mu establishes his Minjung-Messianism, namely, "the Minjung are Messiah."

On the contrary, Suh Nam-Dong accepts all of the traditional titles of Jesus as mentioned above. Suh Nam-Dong does not apply these titles (except Messiah) to the Minjung. Suh Nam-Dong makes a distinction between Jesus and the Minjung. As to his

divinity, he says that Jesus is God incarnate. As to his humanity he is a Minjung in his role as Messiah. In other words, according to Suh Nam-Dong, the Minjung remain limited as human beings and play a role and function of Messiah through bearing the remaining suffering of Messiah. His understanding of the relation between Jesus and the Minjung is not well known. I believe that Minjung theologians must follow his understanding of the relationship between Jesus and the Minjung. I believe that in the interests of the long-term development of Minjung theology that it is imperative to confirm the basic understanding of the relationship between Jesus, the Minjung and the Bible as follows:

1. Jesus is the Christ and the Son of God.

Jesus became a human being, the ultimate Minjung. Simultaneously, however, He is also the transcendent God, Messiah, Son of man, Son of God and Redeemer who differs from the Minjung and humanity in general in significant ways. If we do not recognize this vertical dimension of Jesus, we will stop being Christian. Minjung theology has contributed to Church, in both Korea and the world, to a considerable degree by emphasizing the horizontal dimension of the Christian faith. This horizontal dimension must continue to be emphasized in the future. Nevertheless, the vertical dimension should not be given up at the expense of the horizontal dimension. The necessity of the vertical dimension is requested very much in the Minjung church and is emphasized continually in the Minjung Church. We should not cover our ears to hear this voice from the Minjung Church. The power of participating in the Minjung movement of the horizontal dimension is derived from this vertical dimension. We should not forget this. The task of second generation Minjung theology is to strengthen the strong points of the horizontal dimension and at the same time to reinforce it with the vertical dimension. I believe Minjung theology must be developed on Peter's confession that "Jesus is the Christ and the Son of the living God" (Matt. 16:16). Only if it does this can Minjung theology become a theology built on a solid rock from which it can do its mission.

2. The Minjung Play a Role of Messiah

The Minjung are not equal to Jesus who is the Messiah. The Minjung cannot save themselves without Jesus Christ. The Minjung need salvation from Jesus Christ. The Minjung as the subject of history carry the burdens of people in history and play a role of Messiah. The Minjung play a role of Messiah in two ways. One way they play the role of Messiah is in a passive way as is shown in the parable of the good Samaritan. A man fell into the hands of robbers and they stripped him of his clothes and beat him. He

was half dead and cried out for help toward passersby. This groan, crying for help plays a role of Messiah. The Minjung in Matthew 25:31-46 who are hungry, poorly clothed and kept in prison, also play a role of Messiah in a passive way. The other way is a role of Messiah in an active way. The role of Messiah in an active way is to accomplish the salvation and liberation of God in the world through leading social reform and revolution by the Minjung as the subject of history. However, we must not overlook the fact that Minjung can become the subject of history under the leadership of God who is the subject of history.

3. The Bible is the Canon.

Ahn Byung-Mu does not recognize the Canonicity of the Bible²⁴ and Suh Nam-Dong says that the Bible is a point of reference or a reference book.²⁵ According to them the point of reference or reference book includes not only the Bible but also Church history and the Minjung tradition of Korea too. Suh Nam-Dong insists that theologians must take these Minjung traditions as materials for Minjung theology too. Yet a problem lies in the fact that contents of Minjung traditions are diverse and different. Their value systems are not only diverse, but also contradictory and antithetical to each other sometimes. Even if they are important Minjung traditions, we cannot say that all contradictory Minjung traditions are right. We must have a criterion that can measure and judge various Minjung traditions and discern between good and evil, true and false. I believe that that criterion is the Bible. The Bible is a book different from other Minjung traditions. If we do not recognize the Bible as our criterion or Canon, then we will be confused and fall into a confusion of values. Therefore it is right to steer clear from saying that the Bible is just a point of reference or reference book, even though we may sympathize with the intentions of Suh Nam-Dong. I believe that Suh Nam-Dong does not equate the Bible with the Korean novels such as Hong Gil-Dong or Seopyeonje (a traditional Korean narrative song), even though he thinks that the Bible and Minjung traditions are points of reference. We can and must use Minjung traditions as well as the Bible, but we must distinguish the Bible from Minjung traditions and recognize the Bible as our Canon.

Conclusion

If we understand Jesus, the Minjung and the Bible as explained above, then many misunderstandings about Minjung theology will be dispelled. But some will raise the following objections: "Such a Minjung theology does not differ substantially from the

traditional European theology if Jesus is Messiah and the role of the Minjung is limited to merely a role of Messiah." Or "if the role of the Minjung is not different from the role of the Minjung in traditional European theology, then the specific character of Minjung theology will be lost, if we understand that Jesus is the only Messiah and the Minjung play only a role of Minjung." They will doubt the special character of Minjung Theology and ask, "What is the specific character of Minjung theology? What is the role of the Minjung in the history of salvation and liberation under this new understanding of Minjung and Jesus?"

I believe that the specific character of Minjung theology will be preserved and will not be discolored even under this new understanding of Minjung theology that teaches that Jesus is the only Messiah and the Minjung play a role of Messiah. Rather than diminishing Minjung theology, I believe that Minjung theology can stand on firmer ground, be more fruitful and contribute more fully in the life of the Church and society under this new understanding of the relationship between the Minjung and Jesus.

NOTES

¹J. Moltman, "Minjung Theology for the ruling Classes", in: *Minjung & Theology*, Vol. 4 (The Institute of Minjung Theology, 2000), 29.

²Ahn, Byung-Mu, *A Story on Minjung Theology* (Korea Theological Study Institute, 1987), 96.

³Ibid., 105.

⁴Ibid., 105.

⁵Suh, Nam-Dong, *A Study on Minjung Theology* (Han-gil-sa, 1983), 54.

⁶Ibid., 13.

⁷Ibid., 189.

⁸Ibid., 299.

⁹Ibid., 58.

¹⁰Ibid., 59.

¹¹Ibid., 55.

¹²Ibid., 34.

¹³Ibid., 123.

¹⁴Ibid., 132.

¹⁵Ibid., 108.

¹⁶Ibid., 253.

¹⁷Ibid., 319.

¹⁸Ibid., 318.

¹⁹Ibid., 351.

²⁰Ibid., 181.

²¹Ibid., 217.

²²Ibid., 180

²³Ibid., 180-181.

²⁴Ahn, Byung-Mu, *A Story on Minjung Theology*, 73.

²⁵Suh, Nam-Dong, *A Study on Minjung Theology*, 166, 184.