

# Thinking about Social-ecological Transformation through the Structure of Paul's Messianic Life\*

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## Abstract

In the face of the urgent crisis of the times on a global scale today, theology needs to go beyond self-apologetic and provide a 'actual contribution' for theories or discourses to meet the needs. This study aims to solve this perception in the theme of 'social-ecological transformation.' In order to transform the social-ecological system, the paradigm at the macro level, power and institutions at the meso level, and culture and awareness at the micro level must all change. In this article, a 'conceptual framework for social-ecological transformation' is introduced, and through this framework, the synthesis of degrowth and decoupling, two representative discourses of responding to climate-ecological crisis, will be mediated between structure and practice. It is dealt with by turning to the

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problem of describing the meso level. At this point, by applying the structure of St. Paul's 'messianic life' to the structure of meso level power and politics, theology can provide a 'actual contribution' to the discussion of current issues to respond to the urgent global climate-ecological crisis.

**Keywords**

Degrowth, Decoupling, St. Paul, Giorgio Agamben, Messianic Life,  
Social-ecological Transformation

## I. Social-Ecological Transformation: Two or One Question

This article is an effort to answer the following two questions by combining them: first, how can Christian theology be of practical help in using power for social-ecological transformation? Second, how can we imagine degrowth as the goal most compatible with social-ecological transformation when the goal of research programs and institutional projects to respond to the climate crisis is mainly decoupling? Let's start by understanding the meaning of these questions by explaining the concepts behind them.

*Social-ecological transformation*(SET), which appears in the first question, refers to a case where changes in social structure occur in close connection with strengthening ecological sustainability. In this regard, Stephanie Sievers-Glotzbach & Julia Tschersich propose a *conceptual framework for SET*,<sup>1</sup> This conceptual framework is intended to evaluate whether various research programs or plans for institutional change to respond to the climate crisis are suitable for SET. At the same time, it is intended to provide an answer to the question of how practice for the transformation will lead to structural change.

In this proposal, they consider SET divided into three levels: macro level, meso level, and micro level. The macro level captures the normative *orientation* of transformation. The orientation here are to form a social-ecological system that guarantees the sustainability of ecological functions through profound changes in the existing social structure. The

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1 Stephanie Sievers-Glotzbach and Julia Tschersich, "Overcoming the process-structure divide in conceptions of Social-Ecological Transformation: Assessing the transformative character and impact of change processes," *Ecological Economics* 164 (2019), Article 106361.

micro level illustrates specific *actions* pursued to achieve macro level goals. Examples of them include social movements, social entrepreneurs, civil society initiatives and actor networks at local regional spatial scales.

However, the key in the relationship between macro and micro levels is whether micro-level actions can achieve macro-level goals. The meso level is required to mediate the interaction between practice and structural transformation. Here, the meso level refers to “the space where power and politics create institutions and policies.”<sup>2</sup> The arrangement of power can be said to be a channel that enables a dynamic relationship between practice and structural change.

The arrangement of power is achieved through institutions. Practices for transformation (micro level) act as a ‘power as context-shaping’ that goes against the existing social paradigm and creates the context of structural change (macro level) through institutions, and in turn, this changed structure (macro level) act as a ‘power as conduct-shaping’ that promotes practices and actions with a transformative character (micro level) also through institutions. Through this virtuous cycle of power, the micro and macro levels are connected, moving toward SET. Therefore, how power operates at the meso level can be said to be a very important key to SET.

In conclusion, the first question can be changed to “What practical answers can Christian theology provide to the matter of how power operates to mediate practices and structural transformation for SET?” I would like to find the answer to this question in the structure of *messianic life* that can be read in 1 Corinthians 7: 29-31.

The second question is an attempt to find specific alternatives to respond to the climate crisis, using the answer to the first question as a stepping stone. Because the problem of conflict between decoupling and de-

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2 Hyo-Je Cho, *Ecocide the silent crime* (Paju: Changbi Publishers, 2022), 253.

growth is a matter of figuring out how to move toward a new structure of ecological society based on the current social structure. The current social structure has an inertia to respond to the climate crisis by decoupling. On the contrary, the new ecological society that has to be reached through SET seems to be more friendly to degrowth.

Decoupling is defined as the claim that growth is not necessarily undesirable and that “a very different type of growth and dedicated action can make it possible to maintain growth while reducing environmental pressure.”<sup>3</sup> This is the idea that greenhouse gases can be reduced while growing the economy. It is confidence that sustainable growth is possible, that we can maintain the functions of the Earth's ecosystem even as our pockets grow fat and some nations' GDP grows.

On the other hand, degrowth “means a complete break with the evil, hellish logic of growth for growth's sake that is harshly driving the Earth down the path of destruction.”<sup>4</sup> It “is a planned reduction of aggregate resource and energy use in high-income nations designed to bring the economy back into balance with the living world in a safe, just and equitable way.”<sup>5</sup> In short, degrowthists argue that greenhouse gases can never be reduced if we continue to pursue economic growth at the current level, and therefore we have to break with growthism to realize ecological sustainability.

However, the real problem is that decoupling appears to be the most realistic alternative that can be pursued within the current social

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3 Jason Hickel & Stéphane Hallegatte, “Can we live within environmental limits and still reduce poverty? Degrowth or decoupling?,” *Development Policy Review* 40 (2022), e12584, <https://doi.org/10.1111/dpr.12584>.

4 Riccardo Petrella, Serge Latouche & Enrique Dussel, *Degrowth: A Study of Economic Systems*, trans. Sung-Hun Ahn (Nonsan: Daejangan, 2021), 63.

5 Hickel & Hallegatte, “Degrowth or decoupling?”

structure. The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)<sup>6</sup> presented by the UN are a representative *sustainable growth* program. ESG and RE100 also are plans that pursue decoupling. The institutions and policies we have are all geared towards decoupling. Institutions and policies formed along the terrain of power that seeks to achieve ecological sustainability while leaving the social structure intact form the meso level of mainstream human civilization. Therefore, the task before us is how to realize the social-ecological transformation goal toward degrowth with powers and institutions oriented toward decoupling (this is our realistic starting line). The structure of *messianic life* as read in 1 Corinthians 7:29-31 can also be the answer to this second question by becoming a key medium connecting the power and institutions of decoupling with the goal of degrowth.

The following is a process of evaluating and exploring how the structure of *messianic life* presented by Paul can couple meso-level institutions and power of decoupling with the goal of degrowth, and thereby how Christian thought can contribute to SET.

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6 The term “sustainable development” was officially coined in the 1987 report “Our Common Future,” submitted to the UN by the World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED). In this report, the term is used to signify clean growth that ensures the sustainability of ecosystems, social justice, and economic advancement. The intention is to explore ways to sustain economic growth without destroying ecosystems. However, as industries thrive for economic growth, the increase in greenhouse gas emissions by humans exacerbates climate crisis. This raises considerable controversy over the actual feasibility of sustainable development. The term “Sustainable Development Goals” (SDGs) refers to the objectives adopted by the United Nations General Assembly in 2015 to achieve sustainable development. The timeline for implementation spans from 2016 to 2030, covering a 15-year period. Targeting both developed and developing countries, the SDGs consist of 17 overarching goals with 169 specific targets. As these goals aim for sustainable development, they inherit and perpetuate the controversies associated with the concept.

## II. The Structure of *Messianic Life*

The very fact that the issue we are currently addressing is aimed at SET is a premise to utilize the structure of the messianic life derived from theology in attempting to arrange the power within the meso level of SET. Thus, the structure of *messianic life*, which must be considered here, is associated with creating newness in the history of humanity in this universe. What is the crucial is whether it is possible to see *messianic life* as a purely historic event. Giorgio Agamben's book *The Time that Remains* focuses on this possibility.<sup>7</sup>

Before explaining the structure of *messianic life* found by Agamben in a letter of Paul, it is important for future discussions to check what ways this is in line with and what ways it is different from biblical scholars' interpretation. For this, first, let's take a quick look at some biblical theologians' interpretations of Paul's *messianic life*. It is 1 Corinthians 7:29-31<sup>8</sup> that the text to look at is. The key point in this text is the meaning of *hos me* (*ōs mē*), *as if not*. Why does Paul recommend maintaining the world's *form* (*schēma*), but at the same time pretending that there is no such form?

### 1. *As If Not*: A Theological Interpretation

In general, biblical scholars understand the meaning of *as if not* from

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7 Giorgio Agamben, *The Time that Remains: A Commentary on the Letter to the Romans*, trans. Patricia Dailey (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005).

8 What I mean, brothers and sisters, is that the time is short. From now on those who have wives should live as if they do not; those who mourn, as if they did not; those who are happy, as if they were not; those who buy something, as if it were not theirs to keep; those who use the things of the world, as if not engrossed in them. For this world in its present form is passing away. (1Co 7:29-31, NIV)

an eschatological perspective. “The framing of vv. 29-31 is clearly eschatological,”<sup>9</sup> understood as additional parenthetical verses within 1 Corinthians 7. The eschatological idea of verse 29, which states that the time until the end is short, and verse 31, which states that the world’s form will soon pass away, surround the structure of *as if not* as a premise and reason.<sup>10</sup> However, Paul’s concern is not the end itself, but reconsidering present existence in the light of the end. As Gordon D. Fee points out, “Paul’s concern... is... with the radical new perspective the ‘foreshortened future’ gives one with regards to the *present* age.”<sup>11</sup> Here, the radical new perspective means maintaining the current form of secular life while living out completely new values<sup>12</sup> and meanings<sup>13</sup> within that form in the present time.

Where are new values and meanings based? These are primarily based on the recognition that this world’s form will sooner or later pass away (v. 31), so its effective meaning is bound to be lost. This recognition presupposes two more important foundations. First, Paul is not talking about the disappearance of the world itself, but the disappearance of its form. Second, the basis for the form of this world becoming meaningless to Christians is the “saving event of Christ,”<sup>14</sup> and therefore Paul’s Christological understanding. In other words, insofar as the saving event of Christ is read in terms of the tension of “already/not yet”<sup>15</sup> by Christians,

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9 David W. Kuck, “The Freedom of Being in the World ‘As If Not’ (1 Cor 7:29-31),” *Currents in Theology and Mission* 28.6 (2001), 589.

10 *Ibid.*, 591; Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1987), 335, 337, 341-342.

11 Fee, *the Corinthians*, 339.

12 *Ibid.*

13 Kuck, “The Freedom of Being in the World ‘As If Not’,” 590.

14 Fee, *the Corinthians*, 340.



“... even now what others are absorbed in, the Christian is free from.”<sup>16</sup> Or, in that this tension is like “the tension of the new life in Christ set in the midst of much of the same old life in the world as before,”<sup>17</sup> *as if not* is “a charter for critical freedom, not a call for withdrawal.”<sup>18</sup> David W. Kuck summarizes the significance of Paul's *as if not* structure today as follows: “For us today Paul is providing a platform for a critique to be made from within our involvement in such arenas as globalization, ecumenical relationships, and cultural diversity.”<sup>19</sup>

Biblical scholars' understanding of the structure of *as if not* clarifies the relationship between the end of this world and present life. The present is not consumed or withdrawn in anticipation of the end, but rather the end is internalized in the present life in a way that leads to a new life even in the difficult reality of the present. At the same time, it is discovered that in the structure of *as if not* Christology and eschatology intersect each other and give meaning to earthly life. However, it is at this point that the difference between theology and Agamben's potential philosophy appears. This is because Agamben organizes the intersection of Christology and eschatology into the structure of messianic *time*. In addition, by understanding the process of realizing new potential in this structure of *time* as *messianic life*, he presents a form of thinking that uses the concept of Messiah purely within history.

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15 Fee understands this tension in terms of eschatology (*Ibid.*, 342), while Kuck understands it in terms of Christian existence (Kuck, “The Freedom of Being in the World ‘As IF Not’,” 593.).

16 Fee, *the Corinthians*, 342.

17 Kuck, “The Freedom of Being in the World ‘As IF Not’,” 593.

18 *Ibid.*

19 *Ibid.*

## 2. *As If Not*: Agamben's Interpretation

"Agamben focuses on St. Paul not as the founder of a new religion, Christianity, but as a messenger of messianic and weak politics."<sup>20</sup> For Agamben, *messianic life* is related to politics, and the messianic time as the time in which that life resides is something that must be "interpreted as a paradigm of historical time."<sup>21</sup> Theologically, Christology and eschatology are the two axes that generate the tension of 'already/not yet,' so if this intersection is treated as a paradigm of historical time, the area of not yet has to move from *Geschichte* to *Historie*. In this case, the discussion must move from the tension of *Geschichte/Historie*, that is, beyond-time/time to the tension of *Historie/Historie*, that is, time/time. *As if not* puts each being and each term in a tension with itself within history.<sup>22</sup>

However, this move does not mean a complete break with the theological interpretation of 1 Corinthians 7:29-31. Theologically, it is almost orthodox that this text should be approached from an eschatological perspective. But it is also possible to argue biblically that the context in which such an approach is requested and the problems sought to be solved by such an approach are very temporal ones.<sup>23</sup> Almost consistent with this argument, Agamben says "The time in which the apostle lives is, however, not the eschaton, it is not the end of time."<sup>24</sup>

Let us examine the structure of Agamben's messianic time, keeping in mind the understanding that in the interpretation of biblical scholars such

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20 Myung-A Shin, *Religious Return in Modern Philosophy* (Seoul: Kyung Hee Univ. Communication & Press, 2021), 346.

21 Agamben, *The Time that Remains*, 3.

22 *Ibid.*, 43.

23 See, Kuck, "The Freedom of Being in the World 'As If Not'," 587-589.

24 Agamben, *The Time that Remains*, 62.

as Fee and Kuck, Paul is interested in living the present life in the light of the end rather than the end itself. Agamben explains messianic time as “the time that contracts itself and begins to end..., the time that remains between time and its end.”<sup>25</sup> Therefore, “this time is the time we need to make time end,”<sup>26</sup> *ho nyn kairos* which “is a contraction of past and present,”<sup>27</sup> and thus the time in which the incomplete (present) and the complete (past) become mixed and undecidable.<sup>28</sup> In this case, the end of time means that beings and terms that were understood as determinable within time cease to have effect and are placed in a state of indetermination. So, messianic time is *kairos* in the sense that it is the contraction of *chronos* itself, experienced within *chronos*. In other words, the “messianic ‘healing’ happens in *kairos* is evident, but this *kairos* is nothing more than seized *chronos*.”<sup>29</sup> It can be said that Agamben understands messianic time as something experienced within historical time as a transformation/abolition of historical time.<sup>30</sup> In this way he politicizes messianic time.

Agamben's argument is that in messianic time *as if not* is the structure of *messianic life* itself and the messianic calling itself.<sup>31</sup> And, if *as if not* is

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25 *Ibid.*

26 *Ibid.*, 68.

27 *Ibid.*, 78.

28 See, *Ibid.*, 75.

29 *Ibid.*, 69.

30 Agamben attempts to explain messianic time in detail using French linguist Gustave Guillaume's concept of operational time (*Ibid.*, 65-68). To explain it very simply, our intellect always understands time by spatially imaging it, and in this understanding of time, there is always remaining time that cannot be captured through this imaging alone. This time that remains is “such a time to truly become a part of the subject as an ex-sistence and break the chronology.” (Dominik Finkelde, *Paul's Political Eschatology: Badiou, Agamben, Zizek, Santner*, trans. Jin-Seok Oh (Seoul: b-books, 2015), 71.

the tension of being in history itself, as Dominik Finkelde explains, this can be said to mean making “the subject questionable where the subject think of oneself most clearly, that is, in one’s most everyday representation [appearance].”<sup>32</sup> This question is a kind of the revolutionary.

Agamben clearly explains the revolutionary nature of the structure of *messianic life* by linking the life of a person who has received the messianic calling (*klēsis*) with class (*Klasse*). Insofar as class is a concept opposed to status, which insists on the necessity of division, class indicates the contingency of division. Then, in the relationship with the bourgeois class, the “class, the proletariat, incarnates this split in itself and lays bare, as it were, the contingency of each and every figure and social condition; nevertheless, it alone is capable of abolishing this division and of emancipating itself along with society as a whole.”<sup>33</sup> In other words, the proletariat can be emancipatory not by positioning itself as the opposite of the class relationship with the bourgeoisie, but by revealing the contingency of such class relations themselves, questioning their absoluteness and suspending their actual effectiveness.

Agamben understands *as if not*, the structure of *messianic life*, “not as establishing identity,”<sup>34</sup> but “breaking all identity, decision, regulations on race, nation, and legal order”<sup>35</sup> through the division of division, that is, the defeasance of division. However, this break of identity does not mean the non-actuality of identity. The actuality of the factual condition is a prerequisite for its abolition.<sup>36</sup> In this sense, “*The messianic vocation*

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31 Agamben, *The Time that Remains*, 23.

32 Finkelde, *Paul’s Political Eschatology*, 62.

33 Agamben, *The Time that Remains*, 30.

34 Finkelde, *Paul’s Political Eschatology*, 65.

35 *Ibid.*

*is the revocation of every vocation.*"<sup>37</sup>

In Fee and Kuck's biblical interpretations, *messianic life* is understood as acquiring new values and meanings while maintaining the existing form of life. But, in Agamben's structure of *messianic life*, all that remains is the nullification of the values and meanings of the existing form of life. In other words, if any new values and meanings can be found in Agamben, it is only in the form of the possibility of abolishing those values and meanings of the existing form.

Although there are differences in the details, there is a certain resonance between the interpretation by Fee and Kuck and that by Agamben. Regardless of how eschatologically hopeful the Paul's letter were wrote, in that the Christian life he urges, that is, the life itself of those who is called, is a matter within history, the consensus of recognition that the messianic calling of living *within* history is an important theme of the Paul's letter is equally evident in both Fee and Kuck's and Agamben's perspectives. However, in that while Fee and Kuck emphasize liberation *rather than* abolition, Agamben emphasizes liberation *through* abolition, and also in that while Fee and Kuck draw the structure of *messianic life* as being in the tension between the apocalypse (transcendence) and this world (immanence), Agamben depicts such structure as being in the tension with oneself of this world, Agamben takes a different path from Fee or Kuck.

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<sup>36</sup> Agamben, *The Time that Remains*, 23.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*

### III. Applying the Structure of *Messianic Life* at Meso Level: Linking Decoupling and Degrowth

The congruence between Fee and Kuck's theological interpretation of the structure of Paul's *messianic life* and Agamben's philosophical interpretation of it allows that structure to be applied to the way power is deployed at the meso level. What both sides agree on is the fact that *messianic life* is resistant and political, in that it is a life within history, and at the same time, it maintains its form given within history but is not lived according to the form. Since our immediate task is social-ecological *transformation* to respond to the climate crisis, the political and revolutionary feature of *messianic life* provides a good reason to apply its structure to discussions of SET. In addition, it is confirmed that the meso level where power and politics create policies and institutions is the most appropriate level of SET to which the structure will be applied. What applying that structure to the meso level here means is that the policies and institutions of decoupling must be formed by political powers that are interpreted as the structure.

However, the differences between Fee and Kuck's and Agamben's interpretations of the structure of *messianic life* raise the question of how this structure can be applied in practice. This question is precisely connected to the question of what it means to integrate Christian literacy with other academic areas. If this means merging not the Christian truth claim itself but the structure of the explanation to persuade the truth claim with other academic areas, then the difference in interpretation does not mean that such integration is impossible, but can be accepted as plentiful alternatives. In fact, Agamben's understanding of Paul is an interpretation of the structure of explanation, and Fee and Kuck's theological under-

standing is also an interpretation of the structure of explanation for the life after the Christian truth claim, rather than an interpretation of such claim itself. In this case, we can consider applying both Fee and Kuck's interpretation and Agamben's interpretation on the structure of Paul's *messianic life* to the meso level of SET. This is the very matter of arranging meso-level power in the structure of *as if not*.

As stated earlier, meso-level power is divided into two types. One is power as conduct-shaping that promotes the micro-level change processes, and the other is power as context-shaping that allows the macro-level social-ecological system to change by challenging the existing paradigm. And these powers all function through institutions and policies. In this way, SET can be said to be a very self-generating and ever-changing concept because these two types of power work by mediating the feedback between the macro and micro levels through institutions and policies. However, in order for the power as conduct-shaping to act as a motivation for various practices of the change process unfolding at the micro level, the macro-level social-ecological system needs to be metastable. On the other hand, the power as context-shaping abolishes the stability of the social-ecological system because it is to establish a social-ecological system in which ecological functions can be sustainable through profound changes in social structure at the macro level.

By the way, in theological interpretation, *as if not* calls for a delayed abolition of the temporal system in that it emphasizes the maintenance of the temporal form based on the tension between the end (transcendence) and this world (immanence). But, in that it predicts that its continuation will not be long, it affirms the maintenance of an unstable and metastable temporal system.

On the other hand, Agamben's *as if not* demands the suspension of the

actual effect of the temporal system based on the tension of being with itself in this world. Therefore, the abolition of the temporal system is affirmed in that its continuation is formally maintained, but its effectiveness enters the realm of the undetermined.

If the theological interpretation of the structure of *messianic life* is used to describe power as conduct-shaping and Agamben's interpretation of it is used to describe power as context-shaping, then a path may be found for a more detailed description of how the meso-level of SET mediate macro-level structures and micro-level practices. At the meso level of SET, power as having a structure of *messianic life* opens the way to drive SET by becoming an actual function that mediates practices and structures even under current of existing systems and policies. In other words, the structure of *messianic life* makes it possible to link decoupling and degrowth.

Let's take the SDGs as an example. The SDGs provide the policies and institutions for decoupling today, but how can they serve as meso-level institutions for SET and as a conduit of power that mediates practices and structures for degrowth? This could be possible if the structure of *messianic life*, in which theological and philosophical interpretations are applied together, acts as power. Each of the 17 provisions of the SDGs can be gradually reborn as a degrowth-oriented system by being adjusted through repeated feedback between maintenance and abolition in a manner of the tension of being with itself under the goal of sustaining ecological functions and profound changes in social structure (applying Agamben's interpretation on the structure of *messianic life* into power as context-shaping). At the same time, the tension between *already* and *not yet* can act as power for conduct-shaping; for one thing, at the dimension of explanation, by means of tuning the micro-level practices to the decou-



pling-based macro-level structure in the midst of a gradual shift towards degrowth; and for another, at the dimension of specific application, in the manner of adjusting the priorities among the 17 provisions at each occasion while provisionally maintaining the existing social system (a form) and not abolishing it right away (applying theological interpretation on the structure of *messianic life* into power as conduct-shaping). As these two processes proceed in the manner of feedback, while today's institutions and policies tuned to decoupling gradually transition to institutions and policies tuned to degrowth, and along with this, practices toward degrowth and the structure of degrowth are adjusted with each other and mutually trans-act, wouldn't it be possible to move forward toward SET that responds to climate crisis?

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