

## **Towards Ecological Conversion**

### **- The Korean Protestant Church and the Theology of the Pain of God**

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## 생태적 회심을 향하여: 한국 교회와 하나님의 아픔의 신학

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본 논문은 한국 교회의 교회론이 심화되는 기후 위기의 여러 요인 중 하나로 작용할 가능성이 있음을 비판적으로 고찰한다. 한국 교회가 창조 세계 보전을 위한 여러 노력을 기울이고 있으나, 교회 중심적 신학은 교회와 모든 피조물 간의 유기적 관계를 망각하게 만들며 동시에 교회의 생태적 책임을 간과하게 한다. 이를 위해 세 가지 교회론적 특징이 비판될 수 있다. 첫째, 하나님의 축복을 물질적 소유와 동일시하며 소비주의를 강화하는 물질주의적 성장 지향성, 둘째, 비인간 생명에 대한 윤리적 책임과 실천을 단절시키는 인간 중심적 구원론, 셋째, 개인의 회심만 강조하여 지구 공동체에 대한 생태적 무관심을 조장하는 신앙의 사사화 현상이다.

이를 극복하기 위해, 본 논문은 기타모리 가조의 ‘하나님의 아픔의 신학’을 바탕으로 한국 교회의 생태적 회심이 필요함을 주장한다. 기후 위기를 하나님의 아픔으로 해석하고 창조 질서 파괴에 대한 공감, 십자가의 화해를 통한 함께살아가기, 성령의 능력을 통한 공-산을 토대로 새로운 생태 신학적 교회론을 제안한다. 이러한 접근은 한국 교회가 생태적 정의를 실현하는 녹색 교회로 변모하는데 기여할 것이다.

주제어: 기후 위기, 생태적 회심, 한국 교회, 기타모리 가조, 하나님의 아픔의 신학

## I. Introduction

The climate crisis stands as one of the most serious challenges facing humanity today. Issues such as rising temperatures, biodiversity loss, and resource depletion threaten not only human survival but also the sustainability of the entire planet. Addressing these issues requires more than just technical solutions; religious perspectives and responses play a crucial role in shaping fundamental understanding and accountability for these problems. In Korea, the Christian church plays a pivotal role in addressing the climate crisis, reflecting its significant societal and cultural influence. However, the theology of the Korean church revolves around anthropocentric theology and actions that often conflict with the ecosystem.<sup>1)</sup> Therefore, this research aims to explore theological elements within the Korean church that may hinder harmonious relationship with the ecosystem, and to suggest a renewed direction centered on ecological conversion. Ecological conversion offers profound insights into the relationship between humans, nature, and even further, human society, challenging churches that have traditionally prioritized religious and individual conversion.<sup>2)</sup>

The concept of the ecological conversion of the church is derived from the background of Kazoh Kitamori's 'Theology of the Pain of God'. A modern Japanese theologian, Kitamori reflected on the concept of

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1) Judith Gruber, "Ec(o)clesiology: Ecology as Ecclesiology in *Laudato Si*," *Theological Studies* 78-4(2017), 812.

2) Denis Edwards, *Partaking of God: Trinity, Evolution, and Ecology* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2014), 149-51.

the pain of God during the dark period of human history marked by World War II.<sup>3)</sup> This theology serves as a crucial foundation for re-considering the church's response to the climate crisis by integrating ecological perspectives with theological reflection. Through theological reflection that regards the climate crisis as the pain of God, the church will develop a broader understanding of life, moving away from a dominating and instrumental view of the groaning world.

In this study, we apply the theology of the pain of God as both a theoretical framework and a methodological approach to explore ecological conversion in the Korean church. This approach aims to provide direction for the church to become a 'green church'.<sup>4)</sup> Ultimately, this research highlights the transformative role of an eco-converted green church in spreading social awareness of the climate crisis and leading to substantive action and change. It seeks to encourage the Korean church to move beyond traditional theological boundaries and embrace an ecological conversion that reflects the pain of God and the hope for the restoration of creation.

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3) Kitamori's theology has been criticized for universalizing the notion of pain, thereby diluting the contextual particularity of historical pain caused by Japanese imperialism. Nevertheless, it offers a significant contribution to Christian ethics by providing a theological framework for postwar reflection on guilt and repentance.

4) 전현식, “녹색 몸 신학의 방법론적 탐구,” 『신학논단』64(2011), 190-91. According to Jun, the color green symbolizes the interconnected relationship between God, nature, and humanity, embodying God's life. In this context, a green church represents a shift from an anthropocentric ecclesiology to an ecocentric ecclesiology.

## II. Clash: Earth and the Ecclesiology

Numerous Korean churches are actively engaged in diverse initiatives for environmental conservation. However, given the escalating severity of the climate crisis, the role of the church must be significantly expanded. Beyond mere participation in environmental protection activities, a critical reassessment of the church's fundamental values and theological perspectives is imperative. Consequently, the Korean church can effectively pursue a responsible ethical response commensurate with the era of the climate crisis by simultaneously sustaining its efforts in ecosystem preservation and engaging in critical reflections on its ecclesiology.

Firstly, the church is quantitative growth-oriented. In the 1960s, through the economic development movement led by the Park Chung-hee government, Korean society experienced rapid growth. The Korean Protestant church played a leading role in the rapid growth of the authoritarian regime and developed a prosperity theology favorable to capitalism.<sup>5)</sup> Within the unique context of division between the South and North, conservative factions of the Korean church, advocating for the long-term rule of the military regime under the guise of anti-communism, granted many development privileges through pro-government actions, thereby receiving political protection that enabled the church to grow rapidly. Additionally, the shamanistic elements of '*Kibock Sinang*', which seek material abundance and longevity on a selfish level,

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5) Dae Young Ryu, *A History of Protestantism in Korea* (New York: Routledge, 2022), 214-15.

strengthened the uncritical acceptance of growth within the Korean church.<sup>6)</sup>

The quantitative orientation of the Korean church is deeply connected to the church growth theory from the United States, which asserts that the growth of the church is God's will and an expression of faithfulness. In this atmosphere, the Korean church pursues large-scale church building and becomes secularized, focusing on external measures such as the number of believers and the financial size of the church.<sup>7)</sup>

Human greed-driven materialism convinces individuals that continuous consumption and possession lead to physical, mental, and spiritual satisfaction. The church produces messages equating material abundance with God's blessings, thus creating theological justification for our society's overproduction.<sup>8)</sup> Such attitudes within the church cultivate a culture that solidifies lifestyles associated with high carbon emissions and the climate crisis.

Secondly, the church has anthropocentric soteriology. At the root of

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6) Sebastian Kim, "The Problem of Poverty in Post-War Korean Christianity: *Kibock Sinang* or *Minjung Theology*?" *Transformation* 24-1(2007), 43. See also Jae Buhm Hwang, "The Shamanistic and Confucian Legacies in the Korean Protestant Church: With Special Reference to its Apolitical Nature," *Acta Koreana* 6-2(2003), 125.

7) Sung Gun Kim, "The Place of Evangelical Christianity in the Korean Public Sphere," in *The Role of Religious Culture for Social Progress in East Asian Society*, eds. Martinez, Juan Francisco, Kwang Suk Yoo, and Brian Byrd (Eugene: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2023), 141-46.

8) Kyu Hoon Cho, "Another Christian Right? The Politicization of Korean Protestantism in Contemporary Global Society," *Social Compass* 61-3(2014), 321-22.

the development of modern civilization lies anthropocentrism. Anthropocentrism has been the driving force behind industrialization and the advancement of science and technology, as well as playing a role in liberating humanity from unjust power and oppression. However, the humanity referred to in anthropocentrism only encompassed the First World — whites and males. Within the mechanisms of modernity, those excluded from this category of humanity were reduced to mere instruments, considered permissible targets for indiscriminate exploitation and oppression. Despite humanity experiencing the limits and pitfalls of selfish anthropocentrism, the church still remains deeply rooted in modern philosophy and theology, focusing salvation solely on the dimension of human existence.<sup>9)</sup> The church continues to advocate for concepts of salvation based on Cartesian dualism, which divide spirit and body, constantly separating human beings from nature.<sup>10)</sup> Salvation-oriented views that prioritize the soul's redemption over the decaying body ultimately lead to the downfall of God's created world, thus fostering indifference toward phenomena occurring within the Earth community. To counter these limitations, a Christian eco-ethical perspective suggests that salvation is completed not only through the redemption of the human soul but also through the eschatological transformation of the created world. Therefore, the church should emphasize humanity's ethical responsibility towards na-

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9) Un Hey Kim, "Christian Planetary Humanism in the Age of Climate Crisis," *Religions* 13-3 (2022), 227.

10) Un Hey Kim, "Apocalypse in Post-Pandemic and Ethics of Mattering," *Korea Presbyterian Journal of Theology* 54-4(2022), 89.

ture and pursue holistic salvation at a dimension that includes the relationship between humans and the groaning creation.<sup>11)</sup>

Lastly, the privatization of faith leads the church to clash with the Earth community. Reducing faith to a purely personal matter, the church adopts a passive stance towards public participation and discourse in civil society.<sup>12)</sup> A dualistic view of faith that regards the world as corrupt diminishes the main focus of faith to individual religious activities.<sup>13)</sup> However, the gospel fundamentally affects not only individuals but also the world created by God. The public nature of the gospel guides the values of the kingdom of God to be realized even within secular society. Therefore, the church must pursue the common good of the entire creation, because all domains of the created world are under God's reign. As a result, the church should be concerned with social solidarity in its relationship with the world and engages in the goal of societal transformation.

The three ecclesiological characteristics of the church have served as theological justifications for exacerbating the climate crisis. By ignoring the fact that all beings created by God, not just humans, are objects of salvation, they have excluded other creatures from the realm of salva-

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11) Christ's cross reveals salvation's ecological dimension, reconciling humanity and nature (Eph 1:10; Col 1:19-20). This holistic salvation, inclusive of creation, does not assert pantheism or panentheism. Rather, I argue that we must explore anew the possibility of humanity's and the church's ethical responsibility in caring for the creation as God's domain.

12) Sung Gun Kim, "The Place of Evangelical Christianity in the Korean Public Sphere," 140.

13) Sebastian Kim, *Theology in the Public Sphere: Public Theology as a Catalyst for Open Debate* (London: SCM Press, 2013), 71.

tion, treating nature as mere instruments and causing harm and destruction. The pursuit of excessive materialistic lifestyles for human convenience has resulted in the loss of human holiness, which should be reflected as the image of God. Narrowing faith down to an individual level has hindered a responsible section to the Earth community, allowing the ecosystem to be destroyed.

The following chapter argues that beyond religious conversion, the Korean church needs ecological conversion. The study aims to examine the theological insights of Kazoh Kitamori's theology of the pain of God as a foundation enabling ecological conversion.

### III. The Pain of God: Climate Crisis and the Korean Church

#### 1. Literature Review: Ecological Conversion

The concept of ecological conversion, originally introduced by Pope John Paul II, received renewed theological attention when Pope Francis placed it at the center of his 2015 encyclical *Laudato Si*. Within this framework, ecological conversion is understood as a call for Christians to embody the Gospel by earnestly embracing their responsibility to safeguard the world, which they believe is a gift from God.<sup>14)</sup>

Ecological conversion challenges the anthropocentric orientation of traditional theology and highlights the interdependent relationship be-

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14) Pope Francis, *Laudato Si': On Care for Our Common Home* (Vatican City: Vatican Publishing House, 2015), 221; Roberto Puggioni, "Pope Francis and Degrowth: A Possible Dialogue for a Post-Capitalist Alternative," *International Journal of Public Theology* 11 (2017): 7-35.

tween humanity and the whole of God's creation, Jürgen Moltmann, for example, expands both the doctrine of creation and the Trinity through an ecological lens, emphasizing the immanence of the Spirit and the responsibility to preserve the integrity of the created world.<sup>15)</sup> Such a conversion transcends private spiritual experience and entails a transformation on both communal and cosmic levels.

Moreover, ecological conversion is closely tied to ethical practice. Larry Rasmussen frames this concept within the paradigm of sustainable discipleship, emphasizing that Christian faith must be embodied in ecological responsibility.<sup>16)</sup> In Korean theological discourse, Kim Hoe-Kwon interprets ecological conversion in light of the Kingdom of God and shalom, asserting that the church bears a public responsibility to participate in the restoration of the created order.<sup>17)</sup>

Ultimately, ecological conversion is not merely a religious iteration of environmental activism. Rather, it is a theological imperative that seeks to restore the broken relationships among humanity, nature, and God. It has emerged as a critical theological task for contemporary Christian communities responding to the ongoing ecological crisis.

## 2. From Religious Conversion to Ecological Conversion

To overcome the climate crisis and properly care for the Earth com-

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15) Jürgen Moltmann, *God in Creation: A New Theology of Creation and the Spirit of God*, trans. Margaret Kohl (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), 9-42.

16) Larry Rasmussen, *Earth Community, Earth Ethics* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1996), 201-220.

17) 김회권, “창조세계의 회복과 하나님 나라,” 『기독교사상』672(2016), 48-65.

munity as God's creation, the church needs to recognize the severity of the climate crisis and shift its distorted thinking, perspectives, and cognitive paradigm contributing to this crisis. Such changes can be referred to as ecological conversion. While the Korean church has emphasized religious conversion through evangelistic activities targeting non-Christians and people of other religions, it is now imperative for the church itself to repent of its anthropocentric theology and behavior, and to achieve ecological conversion by reclaiming its role as a co-responsible participant in God's work of creation.

Conversion arises from self-awareness of sins. Reclaiming the church's image as it pursues a sustainable society, social justice, and solidarity, and liberating it from the pressures of consumerism imposed by capitalism and the profit-maximizing logic of the market require self-awareness to precede. The church must first acknowledge its complicity in the exploitation and destruction of plants and animals by internalizing the norms of Western colonial intellectual superiority.<sup>18)</sup> This need for self-awareness can be further understood through Kazoh Kitamori's theology of the pain of God.

During the World War II, Japanese modern theologian Kazoh Kitamori interpreted the contemporary anguish through a theology of the pain of God. He sought to overcome the traditional Western theological methodology that interprets God as a metaphysical and transcendent being above humanity. Instead, he interprets God as below

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18) Catherine Keller, *Political Theology of the Earth: Our Planetary Emergency and the Struggle for a New Public* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018), 65-66.

humanity or within humanity, attempting to establish contact between transcendence and human existence.<sup>19)</sup> The understanding of God, derived from the context of human suffering during that dark period of human history, focuses on the image of God revealed through the analogy of pain (*analogia doloris*), demonstrating the possibility of the connection between human suffering and God by focusing on God's appearance in pain.<sup>20)</sup>

Kitamori emphasizes that the pain of God is indeed a topic that represents the essence of God (*ousia, substantia*) well. He sheds new light on the pain of God, which was overlooked in classical theology, stating that "God's love is based on God's pain". The attributes of God developed within the framework of Greek philosophy include immortality, impassivity, perfection, eternity, etc., indicating a being that is not influenced by the world nor affects the world.<sup>21)</sup> This new concept is completely different from the concept of God described in the Bible. The theology of the pain of God, as argued by Heinrich Ott, moves beyond the impassivity that has dominated Western theology, bringing the issue of God's suffering to the forefront and helping to understand God in a more personal aspect. In this regard, the theology of the pain of God is not fixed in various positions of life but is a "theology of openness"

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19) Hideo Kishimoto, Kazo Kitamori, Fumio Masutani, and Sokyō Ono, "What Is Religion? A Panel Discussion," *Contemporary Religions in Japan* 4-2(1963), 120.

20) Kazoh Kitamori, *Theology of the Pain of God: The First Original Theology from Japan* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2005), 56. See also 김영원, "기타모리 가조의 『하나님의 아픔의 신학』에 나타난 신학적 인간론에 대한 비판적 고찰," 『장신논단』 55-2(2023), 105.

21) Jürgen Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom: The Doctrine of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), 23-24.

that brings about a transformation in traditional and classical concepts of God.<sup>22)</sup>

Kitamori argues that God's pain signifies His love for sinners, who are the objects of His wrath, and that God's love overcomes His anger. The core of the theology of the pain of God lies in loving those whom He cannot love and giving His only Son to death because of those whom He cannot love. Thus, Kitamori provides a theological lens that reinterprets the human existence of suffering through the principle of the cross, where God experiences suffering, within the context of Christ's suffering.<sup>23)</sup> This profound understanding of God's pain deepens the recognition that human sin devastates God's creation and intensifies His suffering.

This recognition provides significant insights for the Korean church, which seeks ecological conversion through an awareness of sin.<sup>24)</sup> In essence, Kitamori's profound contemplation on the pain of God can serve as a catalyst for ecological conversion by recognizing the destruction of the groaning world triggered by the climate crisis as the pain of God. That is, by recognizing God's love, which embraces the suffering inflicted upon His creation by human sin as His own, humanity can foster a sense of responsibility for environmental degradation and

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22) Heinrich Ott, *Reality and Faith: The Theological Legacy of Dietrich Bohnhoeffer*, trans. Alexander A. Morrison (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1972), 407.

23) Andreas Anangguru Yewangoe, *Theologia Crucis in Asia: Asian Christian Views on Suffering in the Face of Overwhelming Poverty and Multifaceted Religiosity in Asia* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1987), 16-17.

24) Calida Chu, "Theology of the Pain of God in the Era of Covid-19: The Reflections on Sufferings by Three Hong Kong Churches through Online Service," *Practical Theology* 14-1(2021), 14-16.

advance towards ecological conversion.

This urgent need for ecological conversion is particularly critical in the era of the climate crisis. Instead of clinging to naive hope or succumbing to despair, the church should actively engage in efforts that transcend these extremes. As a theological framework enabling ecological conversion for the Korean church, Kitamori's theology of the pain of God offers three dimensions for understanding the age, place, and subject of pain.

### 3. Three Dimensions of the Pain of God

#### 1) The Age of Pain: Understanding the Climate Crisis

Kitamori endeavors to find the concept of the analogy of pain, the connection between the pain of God and human suffering in specific life situations (*Sitz im Leben*). He criticizes Western theology for failing to discover the gospel's core message of the pain of God and finds the essence of the gospel within the boundaries of residence of post-Second World War Japan, a nation undergoing suffering. Kitamori identifies the word "*tsurasa*" (つらさ) as a concept unique to the Japanese people, which most vividly represents the pain of God.<sup>25)</sup> *Tsurasa*, found in traditional Japanese drama *Kabuki*, is the emotion of sorrow that arises from sacrificing or even killing one's own child out of love for another person.<sup>26)</sup> *Tsurasa* is the core aesthetic concept of Japan that allows one to deeply feel and understand the pain of God

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25) Kazoh Kitamori, *Theology of the Pain of God*, 135-36.

26) *Ibid.*, 177.

who sacrificed Jesus Christ. However, there exists a risk of cultural bias in generalizing the pain of God through the existential suffering experienced by the Japanese people using Japan's culturally centered language and emotionally intuitive epistemology. Nonetheless, the significance lies in providing an theological perspective that can interpret and address the era's conditions of post-war suffering through understanding the pain of God.

Kitamori's theological reflection suggests that today's global crisis, characterized by the destruction of life and the threat to humanity's survival due to climate change, embodies the era of pain. Kitamori asserts, "the agony of the world is a symbol of God's pain, and God's pain means the ultimate good tidings of the salvation of the world; these tidings are the truth of all".<sup>27)</sup> The church must interpret the gospel within the spatial and temporal context of the era of pain. Ecological conversion leads the church to accept the climate crisis as God's pain and experience both the immanence and transcendence of the gospel. When looking at the climate crisis as the scene of God's pain, the church realizes that caring for the life created by God is the true way to respect and worship the Creator God. The theology of the pain of God provides the theological practicality and extension where the dynamism of the gospel that raises ecological conversion is realized here and now.

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27) Ibid., 137.

## 2) Place of Pain: Natural Ecosystem

Kitamori's theology of the pain of God is a theology of love based on the pain of God.<sup>28)</sup> The pain of God and the love of God are not opposing concepts but rather are combined. Therefore, the true pain of God is manifested in the love of God because God's love exists in the place of God's pain.

According to Kitamori, the ultimate purpose of today's theology is to restore the essence of God, which is the pain of God. This purpose is fulfilled when the pain of God is combined with the pain of nature, extending beyond human suffering and leading to true healing.<sup>29)</sup> While the theology of the pain of God fundamentally arises from the existential suffering of humans, if his theological insight is interpreted ecologically, beyond anthropocentrism, then the love and healing of God manifested through His pain can be expanded to encompass all life on Earth. This is because our wounds are healed by our Lord's wounds.<sup>30)</sup>

The reality of the broken order of creation as God's wrath compels the church to cease the "sin of self-loving".<sup>31)</sup> Kitamori argues that the heart of self-hatred is indeed the heart of conversion, and within this pain of God, the foundation for salvation can be found. The church has disguised greed, unrestrained mass production, and consumption, manifested as the sin of self-loving, as blessings from God, conquering

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28) Ibid., 95.

29) Ibid., 52-53.

30) Ibid., 80.

31) Ibid., 83.

and legitimizing dominion over the created world. It must repent by restoring the relationship between “I and Thou” with nature, moving towards coexistence and reconciliation. Furthermore, it must move beyond anthropocentrism toward geo-centrism.

God Himself was broken, shattered, and suffered to restore the reality of the earth’s broken ecosystem, which was broken as a result of the sin of self-love. Salvation is the joyful news that God embraces our broken created world to the end. Because of God’s love that embraces the hopeless reality, our pain can be resolved, and our wounds can be healed.

### 3) Subject of Pain: The Korean Protestant Church

The church, as the body of the Lord, is a community that pursues the “ethics of discipleship (*Nachfolge*)” in following Jesus. Considering that the pain of God is contained within the groaning world, the church begins to see it as its own through various efforts to address the climate crisis. A church that willingly endures discomfort, identifies the suffering of Earth’s life forms as its own, and seeks to serve the pain of God through its own suffering is truly practicing discipleship and following the theology of the cross.

Essentially, the church practices discipleship to follow Jesus Christ because it inherits and symbolizes the pain of God.<sup>32)</sup> God, out of love for the reality of human suffering, regards the pain manifested in human reality as His own and seeks to resolve it.<sup>33)</sup> Kitamori argues that

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32) Ibid., 67.

through God's grace, the pain of God, which emerges amidst the pains of reality, unfolds from immanence to transcendence.

The church, recognizing the pain of God as its own, views the climate crisis, a scene of human suffering, as God's pain. When the church listens to and experiences the plea of the deteriorating nature as the pain of God, it can finally repent of its sins. The fact of suffering already reflects the reality of sin, and the pain of God is transmitted and manifested through our sins. Through this, the church undergoes ecological conversion, reflecting on both the cognitive and practical sins contributed by the church amidst the crisis threatening human survival. Ecological conversion enables the church to bear the cross of the climate crisis together and serve the pain of God. Furthermore, it testifies to the pain of God at the destruction of the ecosystem. Through this process of sanctification, the church transforms into true disciples of Jesus who, through love based on the pain of God, provide healing and salvation to all of life.

Through Kitamori's theology of the pain of God, a source of theological reflection for the church to practice ecological conversion has been found. The following section aims to introduce the stages of ecological conversion as concrete steps toward transitioning to a green church.

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33) Ibid., 103.

#### IV. Conversion: Ecological Conversion and the Green Church

The ecological conversion of the Korean church is evident begins with self-reflection and repentance. This repentance addresses its anthropocentric and church-centric theology and practices, which have contributed to the climate crisis. This process marks the first step toward becoming a green church that reacts responsibly to environmental challenges.

Ecumenical missiologist Darrell L. Guder critiques the narrow view of conversion as limited to individual salvation. He advocates for a broader understanding that includes the transformation of the entire church community. Guder emphasizes that the conversion of the church is an ongoing process initiated by the Holy Spirit, leading toward the fulfillment of God's work in Jesus Christ.<sup>34)</sup> Particularly, for the church to become an ecologically responsible religious community, it must undergo an ecological conversion and renounce from the uncritical theology that has endorsed the unchecked greed of individuals, corporations, and first-world nations.

Kitamori argues for the mysticism of pain, where one merges into the pain of God and becomes one with it. The mysticism of pain, which merges one's own suffering with the pain of God, is completed through three stages. According to Kitamori, "the broken order of creation can

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34) Darrell L. Guder, *The Continuing Conversion of the Church* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 206.

be transformed from darkness into light by the power of the order of reconciliation, and then serve in the order of sanctification”.<sup>35)</sup> The broken order of creation, the order of reconciliation, and the order of sanctification can also be understood through the lens of relational Trinity. In this regard, the mysticism of pain serves as a reminder of the interpenetrating relationship among God, humanity, and nature.

In the previous section, three ecclesiological characteristics necessitating ecological conversion were identified: materialistic growth-oriented theology, anthropocentric soteriology, and the secularization of faith. The mysticism of pain offers insights into achieving ecological conversion in the Korean church. It involves compassion for the broken order of creation, living-together through the reconciling order of Jesus’ cross, and sym-poiesis through the sanctifying order of the Holy Spirit.

### **1. Com-compassion: The Broken Order of Creation with God’s Wrath**

For Kitamori, human suffering results from sin. The fact of suffering reflects the reality of sin, and through this suffering, humans discover the possibility of redemption from sin. God uses human suffering as evidence of His own suffering. Thus, humans participate in God’s suffering and attain salvation through it.

The ecological conversion of the church, manifested in the confession sins, provides a perspective that reveal what the church has not seen or has tried to ignore. It helps overcome the pain of God through rich theological imagination embedded within the Christian narrative.

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35) Kazoh Kitamori, *Theology of the Pain of God*, 83.

Evangelical theologian C. René Padilla points out the negative impact of ecological degradation resulting from the blind faith in the logic of development inherent in capitalism, which has affected not only Western societies but developing countries, including the Third World. He argues that human greed, considered the source of all evil, instrumentalizes others and destroys the natural ecosystem. To overcome this, Padilla suggests that the church should embrace repentance not merely as an individual aspect of faith but as a transformation for a new order filled with justice and peace.<sup>36)</sup>

According to Choi, the contemporary Korean Protestant church faces criticism due to its construction practices church buildings. When plans for construction are announced to the congregation, senior pastors often characterize it as “the construction project of the holy temple” and encourage members to contribute financially. Many churches are accused of disconnecting from ordinary citizens, opting for extravagant constructions funded by substantial bank loans. This approach has led some churches to financial ruin, resulting in bankruptcy and the subsequent sale of their properties to dubious organizations. Furthermore, mega-churches are also facing criticism for their ostentatious building projects, which are seen as out of touch with the needs of their communities.<sup>37)</sup>

The church can participate com-passion with creation through practi-

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36) C. René Padilla, “Globalization and Christian Mission,” *Journal of Latin American Theology* 9(2014), 56.

37) Hyung Keun Choi, “Missional Conversion and Transformation in the Context of the Korean Protestant Church,” *Mission Studies* 34(2017), 64.

ces that reflect the theology of the pain of God. First, sharing spaces rather than constructing new buildings embodies a willingness to restrain possessive desires, mirroring God's self-giving love revealed in the pain of withholding divine power. Second, worship and education that cultivate ecological sensitivity nurture a community that learns to perceive the suffering of creation as the pain of God, echoing Kitamori's view that God suffers with and for those He cannot love. Third, churches may organize committees dedicated to carbon fasting and other environmentally conscious actions. This enacts a form of redemptive solidarity, expressing the church's participation in the divine pain caused by human sin and its impact on the groaning world.

Through empathizing with the pain of God manifested within the broken order of creation, the church can move away from the theology of materialistic growth and strive for degrowth by reducing excessive energy and resource consumption, thus practicing balance with the world of life and ecological justice.<sup>38)</sup>

## 2. Living-together: The Reconciling Order of the Cross

If the church has embarked on ecological conversion through self-reflection based on the pain of God, this conversion leads to the process of reconciling the relationship between humanity and nature.

The dominant understanding of salvation in the church is anthropocentric, eschatological, and emphasizes individual conversion. This soteriology imposes theological limitations that prevent Christians from

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38) Roberto Puggioni, "Pope Francis and Degrowth," 13.

actively reflecting on human responsibility for the ecological world. A critical reflection on the church's theology, which predominantly interprets salvation in a human-centered manner, reveals a need to expand the meaning of salvation into an ecological and cosmic concept that encompasses all creation. Ecological conversion involves a paradigm shift toward a 'life-centered soteriology' that upholds the value of life and enables practical changes in daily life.

The theological shift in the church's understanding of salvation establishes a new relationship with the natural world, one of coexistence, reconciliation, and peace, rather than exploitation and oppression. Moreover, it leads to the discovery of the grace of atonement through the cross, reconciling all creation, including humans, and accepting all creatures as those redeemed through Christ's death.<sup>39)</sup>

The theology of God's pain manifested through the cross liberates the church from the dualistic worldview of modern theology that excludes other living beings from the scope of salvation. The attitude of considering the non-human world as the beings of living-together with humans emphasizes human responsibility as a new ethical subject.

Kitamori argues that the love of the cross is indeed the essence of God, and this essence of God is interpreted from the "language of the cross".<sup>40)</sup> When remembering that the cross is not only God's pain but also God's love, the cross prompts a conversion to a life-centered theology of salvation. The event of the cross urges Christians to embody

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39) Un Hey Kim, "Apocalypse in Post-Pandemic," 89-91.

40) Kazoh Kitamori, *Theology of the Pain of God*, 47.

ecological values such as community, responsibility, and relationality. In this regard, the event of the cross is a bringer of hope. The love rooted in God's pain revealed through the cross is a message of hope for humanity and the Earth community in the desperate situation of climate crisis. The cross, containing God's pain, demonstrates *kenosis*, self-emptying, and self-sacrifice. The cross commands the church and the faith community to reject the selfish understanding of salvation, which loves only oneself, and the destructive actions that result from it, and to take up and follow the cross that brings reconciliation with all living beings.

God demonstrated His inherent transcendent love through the incarnate pain of surrendering His Son on the cross. The core of Christ's cross lies in the process unfolding from an intrinsic love for the reality of suffering to transcendence, living-together with suffering. Therefore, the spirit of the cross is embodied through bodily practice, underscoring its significance.<sup>41)</sup>

The bodily practice manifested in the cross enables the church and faith communities to regard the reality of nature's pain as their own suffering, thus achieving the living-together with nature. Now, the church, by practicing the pain of the cross in concrete situations, completes the sanctification of coexistence where humanity and nature can peacefully dwell together. This is known as the "ethics of pain".

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41) Ibid., 90.

### 3. Sym-poiesis<sup>42)</sup>: The Sanctifying Order through the Holy Spirit

Kitamori argues that true ethics are established only by the encounter of pain. This response becomes possible when the pain of oneself and one's neighbor is connected within God's pain, becoming "one body in Christ" (Eph. 3:6). For the neighbor's pain to be connected to one's own, there must be a "heart that hates oneself", acting contrary to one's will.<sup>43)</sup> According to Kitamori, self-denial and self-sacrifice cannot be achieved by human strength alone. It can only be achieved with the power of the Holy Spirit that sanctifies based on the love from God's pain.

Through the process of ecological conversion, the subject's subjectivity awakens to connect with the pain of others, establishing an order of sanctification. This process becomes a means for the church to overcome the privatization of faith it possesses. In other words, being connected to others means that the faith community undergoes an ethical transformation beyond selfish faith to fulfill the public responsibility inherent in the gospel. Once connected to the pain of others, the subject enters into a mutually interdependent relationship with others, beyond merely objectifying or reducing others to consciousness. Through combining one's own pain with that of others, the subject not

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42) Sym-poiesis, a term drawn from systems theory and further developed by scholars such as Donna Haraway, refers to "making-with" — the mutual, interdependent process of creation. In a theological context, it can denote the collaborative vocation of humanity and all creatures in bearing witness to God's reign through shared, participatory creativity. See Donna J. Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016), 58-61.

43) Kazoh Kitamori, *Theology of the Pain of God*, 83.

only recognizes the existence of others but also gains the ability to respond to the suffering of others, fostering a sense of ‘response-ability’. God’s pain, based on love, becomes a means through which the pain of others embraces the subject through their own pain, sanctifying themselves.

Ethical mysticism enables the church and Christians to respect non-human entities as agents of creation. It prevents them from approaching the relationships between God and the church, the church and the natural world, or God and the natural world in a unilateral or hierarchical manner. The church needs to move away from attitudes that diminish or subordinate creatures with agency, considering them merely as auxiliary means or background to human history. Instead, it should see them as partners in God’s salvific work towards the whole world, alongside humanity, as part of God’s people.

The church is not separate from the ecosystem, nor does it exist above it; rather, it exists within it.<sup>44)</sup> Positioned within the intricate web of the Earth’s life community, the church bears the responsibility to provide ecological imagination for the societal and political crises triggered by the climate crisis. Adopting colonial attitudes that dominate over other life forms or maintaining closed-off relationships only within the church overlooks the essence of the church as God’s pain.<sup>45)</sup> The church requires a recontextualization from both social and ecological perspectives. Now, considering the climate crisis as a matter of faith,

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44) Judith Gruber, “Ec(o)clesiology: Ecology,” 812.

45) Graham Huggan and Helen Tiffin, *Postcolonial Ecocriticism: Literature, Animals, Environment* (London; New York: Routledge, 2010), 4-7.

the church can declare hope by proclaiming its calling to heal and liberate the Earth community amid the climate crisis era.

## V. Conclusion

This study critically reflects on the ecclesiological characteristics of Korean Protestant church in the era of the climate crisis, emphasizing the necessity for churches to achieve ecological conversion which goes beyond religious conversion. It highlights three key characteristics — materialistic growth-oriented theology, anthropocentric soteriology, and the secularization of faith — as exacerbating factors in the conflict with the climate crisis.

Through an analysis of Kitamori's theology of the pain of God, this paper serves as a theological impetus for the church to critically reflect on its theology and practices, aiming to achieve ecological conversion. It extends Kitamori's theology to incorporate the suffering non-human world as the object of God's pain. The paper argues that by attending to the suffering earthly life forms as the pain of God, the church can avert the phenomenon of life destruction, which threatens both itself and humanity.

Central to this transformation is the church's recognition of the interdependence between humans and nature, along with the respect and care owed to all non-human lives as creatures of God. Ecological conversion, therefore, emerges as a process through which the church responsibly responds to the climate crisis, transcending traditional ecclesiology through com-*passion*, living-together, and sym-*poiesis*.

As the first step toward becoming a green church capable of addressing climate issues, ecological conversion heightens awareness of the climate crisis and positions the church as a moral community dedicated to safeguarding the Earth's ecosystems.<sup>46)</sup> By embracing a theology centered on life, the church can foster collaboration with diverse faith communities, contributing to positive changes for the future of the global community.

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46) Since this study is a theoretical exploration of ecological conversion for the church, specific practical measures for ecological conversion will be addressed in future research.

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• ABSTRACT •

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Towards Ecological Conversion: The Korean Protestant Church and  
the Theology of the Pain of God

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This paper critically examines how the ecclesiology of the Korean Protestant church may have contributed to the escalating climate crisis. Despite existing creation care initiatives, it argues that a church-centered theology obscures the organic relationship between the church and all creatures, undermining ecological responsibility. The analysis focuses on three critical aspects: (1) a materialistic orientation that equates divine blessing with material acquisition, reinforcing consumerist tendencies; (2) an anthropocentric soteriology that severs ethical responsibility toward non-human life; and (3) a privatized form of faith that cultivates ecological apathy within the Earth community. To address these theological limitations, the paper proposes an ecological conversion of the church, drawing upon Kazoh Kitamori's 'Theology of the Pain of God'. This theological framework emphasizes compassion for the broken order of God's creation, reconciliation through living-together enabled by Christ's cross, and sym-poiesis through the Holy Spirit's sanctifying work. The study ultimately envisions a renewed ecological ecclesiology in which the Korean church embraces ecological justice and sustainable coexistence with creation.

**Key words:** Climate Crisis, Ecological Conversion, Korean Protestant Church, Kazoh Kitamori, Theology of the Pain of God

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