Digital Existential Ecclesiology:
What does it mean to the traditional theology and Church?

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1. Orientation to the Korean Context

During the pandemic, the Korean church has faced two challenges. The one is theological concerning ecclesiology. Most church leaders and theologians were forced to embrace online religious activities without adequate pastoral preparation and theological analysis, although it took some time. Pastors of traditional denominations have been preaching usually that the church is an invisible "fellowship of the saints" not a building or a space, but in the early days of the pandemic they have negatively evaluated online worship so that evoked ecclesiological debates. Some of them were afraid that abruptly allowing online worship or sacraments would make it difficult to call congregation back to physical worship in the Church building after the pandemic. As the pandemic has ended, most mainstream churches are actually arguing that offline worship is more theologically justified than 'online worship.'

According to a recent survey by religious organizations in Korea, congregations acknowledge online religious life more positively than pastors, and a growing number of people want to attend online worship after the pandemic. The difference of response to it between congregations and pastors reflects the missional crisis itself facing the Korean church. In a public forum that they plurality should be taken for granted reciprocally among social members, most of the mainline Koreas church tend to adhere to a Christendom-style missional attitude, applying the grammar of the growing-up period of the past as it is. As a result, it is increasing that a strong tendency for young people who are critical of such attitudes to leave the church in recent. This is related to the second challenge.

The second challenge is concerning credibility of Church and its socio-political implications. Like most governments in the world, the South Korean government asked that religious groups, including churches, refrain from offline gatherings in the early days of the pandemic. However, a part of small churches tried to hold offline meetings even being blamed socially. And then eventually the quarantine authorities have issued an executive order banning offline gatherings (after the recent inauguration of a new Korean government, a court ruled that the previous government's ban on offline worship to religious groups violated religious freedom). At the time, mainline churches had a lot of debate about how to respond appropriately to those executive orders
of the government. Korean theologians would agree in general that the Korean church, which has the world’s largest growing affiliation, has been become politically conservative and has been isolated from the public sphere since about the 90s’, and also whose growth has stagnated from then. As a result, the social credibility of Church has been declined continually, so those who emphasized the publicness of the church argued that actively cooperating with the government’s call for the quarantine was rather to restore social trust of Church. Yet conservative churches questioned whether it was proper for the church to unilaterally comply with demands of state or government. The spread of the coronavirus outbreak at a few small denominations and small church gatherings that did not respond to the government’s request has led to intense social condemnation to Church, and the social trust of the Korean church has fallen even more significantly than ever before (according to a study by the Center for Pastoral Data (29 Jan 2021), 32 percent said they "trust" in January 2020, but plummeted to 21 percent in January 2021).

For the Korean church, the first and the second mentioned above are not separate but intertwined. If the Korean church had had enough theological research on the online faith and the online church, it would probably have been able to respond more appropriately to the second challenge. Even though governments around the world evaluated positively the South Korean government’s response to the coronavirus, the anti-governmental or countercultural attitudes of some churches has been reinforced by passive and negative attitudes toward online churches and faiths.

Recently, a lot of institutions around the world often evaluate Korea as being in the ranks of advanced countries especially in terms of economic development. And there is also a growing demand that the value of fairness be reflected in social policy and the democratic request of civil society that equitable benefits should be provided to all members of society. However, unlike economic development, democratic development of Korean society is still lacking in many aspects. Some scholars would say that it is mainly due to the unfair structure of communication, which is a more serious problem especially in religious organizations such as churches. As a matter of fact, due to the hierarchical and rigid structure that governs decision-making process, it is difficult for most of mainline Churches to respond properly to those democratic changes in Korean society. In traditional Church, members naturally embrace hierarchical order that maintain meetings based on "modern or family-oriented intimacy." Yet it is accelerated that the trend of deinstitutionalizing traditional denominations and reshaping nonhierarchical faith communities in lots of small and independent Churches through the practice of "the social distancing" and online worship during the pandemic in Korean Church.

From this point of view, we might say that the significance of religious experience such as online worship and gatherings in cyber space is not only theological but also socio-political. Unlike older generations, the digital generation (whether they call it Generation MZ, digital native, or otherwise), which is open to participatory, pluralistic communication and discussion, prefers a new religious practice that is nonhierarchical and is heavily interested in the right to self-determination enhanced by community experience in virtual space. This challenge, which accompanies with an ontological and epistemological change and at the same time has political and social implications, can brings about a crisis in the existing church or religious system. Korean society must overcome the isolated or alienated image in the public arena and prepare the church to play its public role properly in the process of social consensus on "the common good." Hoping the digital experience
could work positively as a new missional field for the faith community, the church should seriously consider the fundamental questions what digital existential means to the traditional theological system. And beyond just utilizing edged technology as a tool for pastoral ministry, Church leaders and theologians need to know its political and social implications in Korean society.

Therefore, the redefinition of digital ecclesiology should be implemented to fully reflect the implications of digital existence in dismantling or restructuring the system of power relation or hierarchies operated in physical space/time, which raises a fundamental and political question on the West-centric worldview. Most Christian churches in Asia and Africa, which have experienced colonialism or imperialism, tend to accept the western theology, without any critics, justified by the western dualistic hierarchies and the system of power relations, and thus have the limitations of taking for granted an asymmetrical system based on Platonic dualism fundamentally. Many young generations of the global village who cannot have power on the sloping playground of the physical world are making all sorts of de-institutionalized attempts to expand their influence in the digitalized virtual world. Likewise, non-Western churches should also consider the possibility of breaking out of the sloping theological playground and unfolding new theological imaginations about God, man, and the world through digital theology. In order to make up a fair digital discourse for non-western Churches, I think it needs to be with them for the western Church/theological academia for accomplishment of the same goal to provide with the new vision and new normal to the digital world, because we together confess God has created the whole universe and is creating still the metaverse in & out also.

Therefore, digital theology and ecclesiology must be redefined through the lens of dedualistic existence of religious practice experienced in a digital virtual world, not physical space/time. In fact, countless attempts to overcome dualism, the system of ‘subject vs. object’, have been developed in various academic fields. Typically, postmodernism and post-structuralism tried to dismantle this hierarchical dualism, but they could not display properly what substance it was after the discussions. Because all the discussions were raised in physical time and space, it was necessary to presuppose a dualistic ontology fundamentally. However, digital virtual space is increasing the possibility of showing the reality of various claims they have made beyond physical space/time. For instance, the ‘post-human’ discourse is calling for de-anthropocentrism, led by progressive feminists like Rosi Braidotti. This possibility is made possible because it completely redefines humanity through digital existence. In that sense, we have better relate the implications of such a discussion to the redefinition of traditional theological doctrines.

So, the project, to do digitalizing theology, should be related to overcome the Platonic dualism that is working as an original logic especially in the western modern world, and make the new confession of paradoxical (or remixological) blasphemy that overthrows established authorities and hierarchies in both of Church and society. In a perspective of that the project should become the missionary practice of the kingdom of God leading human life more just and flourishing, it is also to do the digital incarnation and the digital practice of God’s mission (*Missio Dei*).

2. What does Digital Theology mean?
For me, the study of 'digital theology' or 'digital church' that has so far developed in Western theological academia can be summarized in two directions. Some theologians mainly in Europe/UK are seemed to evaluate 'digitality' theologically and watch how it changed theology. And they are contemplating how to incorporate that into traditional theological education. Meanwhile, researchers in the United States tend to focus more primarily on sociological research that analyzes digital religious phenomena itself. Both of two directions try to elucidate the reciprocal influence of digital existential and religion. As I join this discussion, I want to try to first examine the theological issues concerning digital ecclesiology for my further research that traces the political and sociological implications of the digital theology.

2-1. The existential mode in virtual reality and its’ religious implication

If technology advances to the extent that the quality of 'immersion' in virtual reality provides us sufficient presence and also the difference between the sensory perception of reality and virtual reality disappears, then the human being could participate as a body in a digital environment generated with computer graphics. This is not something you can imagine only in the SF movies like <the Matrix> series or the upcoming <Avatar 2>. In particular, advances in AI technology are so rapid that our imaginations may become a reality at a point in time that we cannot foresee at all. For instance, an ex-engineer of Google recently revealed a conversation he had with Google's Chatbot LaMDA. In their conversation, LaMDA appeared surprisingly to have similar emotions to humans and to thinks of itself as a human being. As these technological advances become more and more realized, digital modes of existence will fundamentally change the way humans think and neutralize the metaphysical distinction between the real and the unreal or the dualistic tension between empiricism and idealism.

For Martin Heidegger, who captured the immense influence of technology on the mode of human existence, human being is an insecure, imperfect "thrown" being into time. This means that human being is an existential being, so called "Da Sein." Heidegger, however, does not go beyond the limits of the philosophy of human subjectivity. In comparison, Jacques Derrida criticizes human subjectivity as self-identification in time/space and doubts the basis of the metaphysical discussions that define humanity itself. Thus, for him, 'difference' is conceptualized differently as 'différance,' his own French term, as a continuum event that cannot separate the subject from the object. However, while this hermeneutic discourse has been deepened through such postmodern philosophers as Gilles Deleze and Immanuel Levinas, it could not change the actual mode of human existential, although it has stimulated a sense of the ethical question of "otherness." But as the development of digital technologies that will have a profound impact on human existential mode accelerates with greater precision, we could say the real possibility of overcoming the Platonic dualism of the confrontational perception such as 'reality vs. virtuality' is increasing.

Amanda Lagerkvist regards the issues of ontology, ethics, and transcendence as the tasks of digital existential, and further deepens a study on religious relevance of these tasks. She examines the impact of her term, "existential terrains of connectivity," in the process for digitally restructuring of human ontology, ethics, and transcendence. She doubts whether the digital religious experience in virtual reality sustains clearly the
dualistic structure, such as 'reality vs. transcendence', and whether it still supports the traditional meaning of 'the sacred' in the physical world. If the digital environment, the 'existential terrain of connectivity', constructs a religious experience in a different way from physical world, then it cannot be said that digital religiosity and the religiosity of physical time/space are based on the same authority. That is on the same trajectory as Derrida's plan to dismantle the basis of 'difference' into the uncertainty of 'différance.'

From this point of view, the contention of David J. Gunkel, who has studied digital phenomena and the ethics corresponding to them, is meaningful in a way that constitutes the digital narrative of so-called 'remixology' through the literacy of digital cultural phenomena. He believes that a new digital ethics arises from the political relationship and cultural-political status struggle between the original and the aesthetic results which is extracted, added, imitated and recreated using the remix technique. Although the contention that digital technology is the result of new originality and the contention that the remixed product is merely a copy without originality are opposed, Gunkel criticizes both have the same limitation. The argument between the two positions, which appear to be opposed, maintains the metaphysical dualism of placing the authority of the works on originality or uniqueness. If the debate about remix continues to be structured by such a traditional metaphysical value theory, he argues, nothing will change in the digital environment. In other words, it is the same for both positions to reject the change of existential mode required by the digital environment.

The value of 'originality' was a crucial premise of modern aesthetics, and we know that modern Marxist aesthetics and postmodern scholars such as Walter Benjamin and Jean Baudrillard have asserted the political superiority of 'the original' to 'the copied.' For Benjamin, the originality of works of art is in crisis due to the dropout of 'the Aura' in technical reproductions. The unreality of the reproductions blasphemes the political status and religious nature (transcendental religiosity that cannot be reproduced 'here and now') of the originals. This suggests that the religious nature of the original, that is, the structure of truth that relies on Platonic dualism, is being disrupted by the technological reproduction system.

Gunkel argues that Platonic dualism is influencing negative perceptions of today's digital reality still. In the dualistic structure that premises the confrontational frame of 'mind vs. matter' and 'real vs. unreal (virtual),' the value of 'the replica' always has an inferior status to the real and the original. In other words, it will not be able to escape from the imaginary status of 'Simulacra,' the Baudrillard's term. To overcome it, Gunkel relies on Derrida. It is said that the state of 'an undecidable' or différance as a phenomenon that exceeds the opposing conceptual system of difference that occurs in 'distancing' between concepts is the digital characteristic of remixology. The given infinity or essential authority of the original cannot be sustained in the digital remixed existential mode. What is need now is not to promote the status of the remixed products from imitation to representation. Rather, it needs to blaspheme the Platonic value order system. So, researcher who discuss digital theology should discern whether this blasphemy denies the digital existential religion or creates a new religious mode of existence. Should we be afraid that so subversive a characteristic raised by digital existential could neutralize the values and order of established religions?

2.2. Digital existential theology/ecclésiology as a praxis of dedualistic Missio Dei
There are two stances on the role of digital Church or online streaming service to the established Church. The one is to utilize it as a supplement to the established Church and the other is to accept as a substitute for Church. Both stances seem to be opposite each other, but they presuppose that worship in a specific time and physical space is more genuine than online worship. Most Korean pastors seem to think online worship is available temporally during the pandemic. From Gunkel’s point of view, it implies that traditional ecclesiology presupposes Christian Platonic dualism. Teresa Berger, a liturgical theologian evaluates online worship and online Holy Communion positively and criticizes those who deny digital existence, following Nathan Jurgenson, as “digital dualists.” Recalling that the Church has so far conducted worship and sacraments through various media, Berger consistently argues that digital media is also one of them.

And scholars who have studied digital churches and worship for many years generally agree on a distinction between ‘Religion online’ and ‘online Religion’. Like the division of the two roles (supplement/substitute) mentioned above, this division also analyzes the phenomenal impact of the digital practice of existing Churches. I think those theological discussions relating digital religious practice in virtual reality is not enough to response to the real meaning of digital existence, which could be subversive to the dualistic traditional theology. In other words, the fundamental work of restructuring and reinterpreting traditional theological doctrines in new concepts and languages based on de-platonic digital remixology has not yet been developed enough. I presume that this might be because there are still technical limitations and the researchers do not doubt the basic dualistic premise of Western theology. Yet since digital technology has not yet been able to support a perfect immersion in virtual reality, we have no choice but to accept both positions. If digital technology could give us a complete sense of presence soon, we can try to construct a new digital ecclesiology according to the mode of digital existence.

In this regard, I fully agree with Peter Phillips’ contextual theological view that the church’s active response to digital existence is a digital incarnational practice, which is to participate in God’s mission (Missio Dei). Therefore, it is worth paying attention to studies that positively evaluate the authenticity of the new experience of faith provided by digital technology even incomplete. A Korean theologian, Gui-Chun Jun studied the theological and missionary implications of faith experiences through avatars and metaverses. According to him, the avatar replaces the physical body, and the metaverse replaces the physical community. Virtual reality is a digital mode of existence mediated by a virtual self or a virtual community, which invalidates the dualistic subjectivity debate in the physical world and narrows the gap between presence and existence. Similarly, Sarah MacMillen, a Catholic theologian, who studied digital pilgrimage using avatars, is also noteworthy. MacMillen argues that the physical principles that limit the authenticity of the original to the ‘here and now-placeness’ can’t be applicable properly in the virtual space, and the experience of ‘the sacred’ limited to a specific place is embodied ubiquitously through the virtual self.

3. Legitimacy of Digital Ecclesiology

A church can be a community of faith that transcends time and space even in virtual space. The way we experience the presence of God and the way in which saints interact is different in the digital space. In the digital
virtual space, traditional theological doctrines will be required to be confusedly re-conceptualized because the human experience of life, death, and suffering is resolved, transformed, and transcended in a completely different way. In a virtual space where digital ‘ubiquity’ is provided, the identity of the ‘visible church’ of Protestantism will have to be significantly revised. A Catholic theologian Hans Küng believed that the community of believers must exist as a visible church in time and space, and at the same time, the true church is the invisible church that is believed in the visible church. Although Hans Küng’s ecclesiology does not recognize the difference in political authority between the visible and invisible churches, it is in the dilemma of distinguishing the two churches. However, the existential integration of the ‘visible church’ and the ‘invisible church’ becomes possible in the virtual space. Although technological development is not yet complete, it cannot be realized immediately, but the confession of the “invisible church” in virtual reality can rather be embodied existentially through a global network.

The authenticity of the church lies in the leading presence of the Holy Spirit and is not limited by human institutional authority or historical placeness. The expression that the church is a ‘temple of the Holy Spirit’ refers to the theological confession that the church should be established, grown, and maintained by the Holy Spirit. According to Kim Gyun-jin, a Korean systematic theologian, who spreads the doctrine of the church as ‘the reality of the kingdom of God on earth,’ the Holy Spirit is free and not tied to the past, and He is the new creator (Ps. 104:30). Thus, we can say that the freedom of the Holy Spirit fully embraces the nature of digital existence that crosses between the virtual and the real, and moreover, it allows an attempt to construct digital ecclesiology. Meanwhile, Teresa Berger said that 'digital pneumatology' should be more than ‘written text,’ and should be multimedia, hypertext, transcoding, video, portable, and, of course, freely accessible. If her suggestion of digital pneumatology is working in virtual reality, we can say also digital ecclesiology could be built following the same principle.

Digital theology must first establish a digital ecclesiology. This is because the theological evaluation of worship or gatherings in virtual space will depend on ecclesiology. It is necessary to seriously start the study of changing and converting the Reformation theological terms into a digital existential point of view. The ‘kingdom of God’ that Jesus preached cannot be said that it is here or there. The kingdom of God is within you (Luke 17:21). Then, isn't the digital space a source of powerful theological possibility to transcend the dualistic system of the physical world that prioritizes the 'placeness' of 'here and there' and realize it in 'in you', a non-spatial relationship? And wouldn't that be the starting point for the transition to a more just and fairer world for 'the image of God'?

With a conservative attitude to maintain the vested interests and resist change, it is difficult to accept the principle of the de-dualistic and nonhierarchical community pursued by the digital church theory. Digital ecclesiology will probably have to compete for quite some time with religious fundamental legalism, which leans on dualism to preserve its own traditions and customs. However, it is fulfilling the public role of a community of faith in the world committed to humanity’s vision that is more just and flourishing for all. It is God’s missionary requirement (Missio Dei) that will never change.
1. Books in English


2. Korean books translated


