

# Korean Protestantism in the Age of “Surplus of Positivity:” A Socio-cultural Analysis of Church Defaults in South Korea\*

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In this paper the author not only analyzes the considerable number of Korean Protestant churches that are in default, but also attempts to apply the theoretical framework of Han Byung-Chul’s cultural criticism to the status quo situation of Korean Protestantism. Regarding the extent of the church defaults, one notices diverse factors impacting the situation, including a growth-oriented attitude among many senior pastors as well as other church leaders, moral hazards related to financial deals and the socio-cultural components of Korean Protestantism (such as excessive competition between denominations), a preference for bigger churches, the culture of *ch’emyŏn* (face), and church privatization. According to Han, the twenty-first century is an era of neurosis, wherein surplus positivity prompts a series of tendencies such as self-exploitation and depression. The Korean people have been over-worked and over-stressed, and both these factors have contributed to the nation’s suicide rate, which since 2003 has been the highest among the OECD member nations. The phenomenon of the “healing craze” (*K. billing yŏlp’ung*) emerged under such conditions in Korea. Despite these factors, in many cases, emphasis is still placed on a growth-oriented strategy in Korean Protestantism, resulting in a burnout syndrome within congregations, which leads many believers to stop attending church (the so-called *Kanaan sŏngdo*, or Canaan congregation). Meanwhile, the “Small Church Movement” has recently been initiated by some Korean Christian leaders. This phenomenon can be interpreted as an attempt to re-consider the importance and role of small churches, and to emphasize spiritual maturity over numerical growth.

**Keywords:** Korean Protestantism, church defaults, Burnout Society (*Müdigkeitsgesellschaft*), Canaan congregation (*Kanaan sŏngdo*), healing craze (*billing yŏlp’ung*), Small Church Movement

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