

# ORAL ROBERTS AND DAVID YONGGI CHO: A LIFE-LONG RELATIONSHIP IN THEOLOGY AND MINISTRY

YOUNGHOON LEE

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[Spiritus@oru.edu](mailto:Spiritus@oru.edu)

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## Abstract

This article explores the relationship between Oral Roberts, American healing evangelist, and Dr. Yonggi Cho, the pastor of the world's largest church in Seoul, South Korea. It points out how their similar stories of healings were used in their own healing ministries. It also traces the influence that Roberts' theology of hope, prosperity, and healing had on the most influential figure in Korean Pentecostalism.

## Introduction

In April 2006, the author had the opportunity to travel with Dr. Cho, my long-time mentor, to Los Angeles to participate in the Azusa Centenary Conference where Cho was set to be a plenary speaker. Included in his itinerary was a visit to his ailing friend Oral Roberts at his home in Newport Beach, California. On the way, Cho shared with me how Roberts had been a spiritual mentor whose books had a profound influence on him, especially in the formative years of his ministry. He told how his Threefold Blessing was directly attributed to Roberts' inspirational teaching of the seed-faith principle. He also described the core of Roberts' theology

in a phrase, “God is good!” This theological conviction encouraged Cho to emphasize the effect of verbal confession and positive thinking.

When we arrived at Roberts’ home, I witnessed a Christian giant of our day sitting on a rocking chair. Cho introduced me to Roberts and it was immediately apparent that their friendship was special with warm mutual respect and love. When we were about to leave, suddenly Cho bent and knelt before Roberts and requested a prayer with Roberts’ hands laid on him. I was shocked by this unbelievable scene where the leader of the largest church in the world knelt for prayer. (Another friend of ours, Elder Paul Kim, expressed the same shock.) Roberts laid his hands upon Cho and blessed him and asked for God’s intimate presence and favor to rest upon him. He did the same for me and prayed for God’s blessing to preach the good news all over the world with God’s healing power. This was indeed the last time Cho was with Oral Roberts before Roberts’ death in 2009.

This study seeks to juxtapose the lives of Oral Roberts and David Yonggi Cho, trace the development of their mutual friendship, offer a theological analysis of the two, and explore Roberts’ influence on the shaping of Cho’s theology from the perspective of someone who is his close associate. Born into a fourth-generation Presbyterian family, I moved with my family to a new home next to Full Gospel Church in Seodaemun, where my grandfather began attending the daily dawn prayer meetings and was deeply impressed by the spiritual atmosphere of the church. In April 1964, I started attending and was baptized in the Holy Spirit in February 1966 through Cho’s ministry. For over fifty-five years I have been influenced by Cho’s life and ministry and he has shaped my own theology, particularly regarding the baptism in the Holy Spirit, the life full of the Spirit, the Threefold Blessing based on Christ’s redemptive work, and consequential faith of absolute hope. Along this journey of ministering in various responsibilities at Yoido Full Gospel Church, I have discovered the profound impact Roberts had on my mentor. This legacy led me to read Oral Roberts’ books for myself. Today, after fifty-five years of ministry under Cho, I have inherited his mantle as the senior pastor of Yoido Full Gospel Church and the legacy of Cho and Roberts continues to shape my theology and ministry.

## Two Life Stories

Through his healing ministry, Oral Roberts was influential in spreading the Pentecostal movement into historical churches across all continents, including Korea where Roberts' theology influenced Rev. Yonggi Cho, the founder and senior pastor emeritus of the Yoido Full Gospel Church in Seoul, South Korea, the largest Christian congregation in the world. During the mid-twentieth century both Roberts and Cho became great leaders of the global Pentecostal movement. This article will explore the relationship between Roberts and Cho and the theologies they shared in different contexts within the globalization of Pentecostal and Charismatic Christianity.

Although they differed in religious and social contexts, Roberts and Cho shared a common story that influenced their ministries. While in their teenage years, both Roberts and Cho suffered severely from tuberculosis, but had miraculous healing experiences. Oral Roberts was born on January 24, 1918, in Pontotoc County, Oklahoma, the fifth and last child of Ellis Melvin Roberts, a Pentecostal Holiness pastor, and Claudius Priscilla Roberts, of Cherokee Indian descent. His parents, who wanted their last-born to be a competent preacher in the future, named him Oral, which means “spoken word.” Ironically, little Oral was a stutterer who could not even say his own name.<sup>1</sup> During his early years, he hated being a preacher's son and was defiant towards his father, who disciplined his children in a strict Christian way. Young Roberts' struggles with his religious and cultural surroundings led him to rebuff his Christian values and beliefs.<sup>2</sup> Instead, as a tall and athletic fifteen-year-old he joined the high school basketball team in search of athletic fame. At seventeen, however, Roberts collapsed on the floor in the middle of a high school basketball game, vomiting blood from his mouth. He was diagnosed as being in the final stages of tuberculosis and was given three to four months to live.<sup>3</sup>

In July 1935, while bedridden and in the depths of absolute despair, his sister Jewel visited him and prophesied, “Oral, God is going to heal you.”<sup>4</sup> He firmly believed that God was calling him to preach the gospel and would heal him for this reason.<sup>5</sup> At that time, a healing evangelist named George Moncey was conducting a revival meeting in the vicinity.

Roberts attended the meeting with the help of his family. When the time came for prayer for healing, Moncey encouraged Roberts that God had healed an Indian boy of tuberculosis the previous night. Moncey rebuked the sickness with these words: “You foul tormenting disease, I command you in the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, come out of this boy. Loose him and let him go free!”<sup>6</sup> Roberts felt as if he had been struck by electricity and instantly he could breathe comfortably without coughing and spitting out blood. He joyfully jumped into the pulpit and ran here and there, shouting without stuttering, “I’m healed! I’m healed!” Roberts would eventually use his healing testimony as a vehicle to propel him to becoming the most notable name in the healing ministry in the twentieth century.

Yonggi Cho was born into the family of a rich farmer in Ulju County, South Gyeongsang nam-do, southeastern Korea, on February 24, 1936. He was the second of nine children of Ducheon Cho and Bokseon Kim, both of whom were devoted Buddhists.<sup>7</sup> His father ran for the Second National Assembly election on May 30, 1950, as an independent candidate, but failed to win. Because of the election failure and the ongoing Korean War, the economic condition of the Cho family worsened and by his teens Yonggi Cho always worried about his meals.<sup>8</sup>

One spring day, as a second-year high school student, Cho was spending his after-school hours playing on the horizontal bar in the gym. He hit his chest against the iron bar and fell off. Cho grew extremely ill and fell to the ground vomiting blood. He was diagnosed as being in the third stage of tuberculosis and was told by a doctor that he would live just three or so months.<sup>9</sup> Diagnosed with terminal tuberculosis, the seventeen-year-old Cho was waiting hopelessly for death when one day a friend of his older sister visited and shared the gospel with him. She also gave him a Bible. Cho began to read the Bible and felt assured that if he accepted Jesus Christ as his Savior, Jesus would heal him of his tuberculosis. Then Cho repented of his sins in front of Jesus Christ and experienced a miraculous recovery from his terminal illness.<sup>10</sup>

Despite their differences in age and global context, Oral Roberts and Yonggi Cho had very similar religious experiences. The experience of miraculous healing, in particular, influenced both Roberts and Cho to change their courses of life completely. After his miraculous

healing from tuberculosis and stuttering, Roberts, who had been very resistant towards Pentecostal belief and lifestyle, answered the call of God to preach and began his ministry under the guidance of his father in the summer of 1935. Similarly, Cho, who was born and raised in a Buddhist family and was indifferent to Christianity, came to accept Christ through his own experience of miraculous healing. Cho then determined to become a pastor and preach the gospel, and so enrolled at the newly-founded Full Gospel Theological Seminary in Korea.

When Cho first encountered Oral Roberts' teaching in 1961, it changed his life and ministry. As a young minister in 1958, Cho opened a tent church in a slum on the outskirts of Seoul. But after a year of preaching, Cho was frustrated because the church was not growing as much as he expected. Cho's passion and ambition for the gospel was frustrated in the face of his pastoral challenges. The problem was his messages primarily focused on hell and sin and were not proving effective with his audience who were primarily among the poor. As Cho talked about hell, they would respond, "I am not afraid of hell because the place where I now live is hell."<sup>11</sup> Then in 1961, Cho was assigned to be the translator for Samuel J. Todd, an American Assemblies of God missionary, who came to Korea to do a healing crusade. Todd's methods and message of healing were modeled around Oral Roberts' ministry.<sup>12</sup> Todd shared with Cho several of Roberts' sermons and the book *The Fourth Man*. The principles he learned from Roberts altered his Pentecostal theology and transformed his message from the negative to the positive aspects of the gospel. Many of these principles of the goodness of God and blessings would eventually be instrumental in helping him build the largest church in the world.

Cho's success in church growth began to be recognized by Pentecostals and Charismatics in the US in the 1980s. After years of admiration from afar, Cho and Roberts began to spend time together at Charismatic conferences in which they were both invited as speakers. When Oral Roberts began an independent ministerial alliance called the International Charismatic Bible Ministries in 1986, Cho was invited to serve as the "honorary international chairman."<sup>13</sup> Oral Roberts made two visits to minister in Korea by Cho's invitation. The first was in 1986. He visited with Robert Schuller and went to Japan after his ministry at Yoido Full

Gospel Church. Then in 1989, he returned to Korea and spoke at a large gathering of Cho's at the Olympic Stadium.<sup>14</sup> The newfound friendship between Roberts and Cho also led to the mutual theological enrichment of Yoido Church and ORU. Cho also visited Oral Roberts University.<sup>15</sup>

## **Roberts' Theological Influence on Cho**

Cho attributes his success as a minister in Korea in large part to Oral Roberts' influence on his life.<sup>16</sup> Cho comments, "While I was reading Oral Roberts' book, my whole theology changed and I began to have a very optimistic, positive attitude . . . . Whenever I'd pray, I'd begin to believe *Something Good is Going to Happen*."<sup>17</sup> Conversely, Roberts mentioned that he had learned many things from Cho, particularly in the areas of growth and leadership. He commented, "Perhaps the greatest is that I have to become 'PREGNANT' with an idea from God before I can bring it forth to bless mankind."<sup>18</sup> While much of Cho's Pentecostal theology did not necessarily originate with Roberts, some of his best known theological concepts originated from reading works by Roberts. He even wrote several books similar to Roberts in *Jesus Carrying Diseases*,<sup>19</sup> *Threefold Salvation*,<sup>20</sup> and *Seed of Faith*.<sup>21</sup> This section will explore three concepts in Oral Roberts' theology that significantly shaped Cho's theology.

### **God Is a Good God**

The first concept that influenced Cho was Roberts' teaching on 3 John 2. In 1947, Oral Roberts was deeply touched while meditating on 3 John 2 in which he discovered the truth that "His highest wish is for us to prosper and have health in both soul and body."<sup>22</sup> This verse convinced him that God was a good God who is interested in blessing his people, not just spiritually, but who wants believers to have a life of fullness, physical healing, and material blessing. This message of "a good God" became the central theme of Roberts' healing and evangelistic ministry, and he preached the message of hope and prosperity.<sup>23</sup> The teaching of "a good God" not only reflects God's tolerance and mercy, but it also leads believers to expect blessings from God. He asserts that

God, who sacrificed his Son on the cross for his people, cannot be a cruel or fearsome God, but is a good God.<sup>24</sup> Because God is good, he wants his people to experience a prosperous life and enjoy good health in God.<sup>25</sup>

Since both Roberts and Cho were born into impoverished families, the realization that God's blessing transcended the spiritual to the physical and material was completely transformative. Roberts' youth was far from easy, being the son of a poor Pentecostal pastor and suffering from pulmonary tuberculosis at the age of seventeen. But, his healing enabled him to realize that God cared about the physical needs of people. Similarly, Cho also knew the pain of poverty and sickness. In the late 1950s—when Cho started his ministry in a slum area of Seoul—Korean society was undergoing despair and poverty in the aftermath of the Korean War. People who lived nearby Cho's church had a hell-like existence caused by poverty, disease, alcoholism, and domestic violence. People who were living in such extreme conditions were hardly interested in the gospel preached by Cho, and the atmosphere, which was unfavorable to evangelism, drove him to a state of despair and skepticism.

Roberts' positive message of blessing and abundant life helped Cho realize that he needed to change the way he ministered to the needs of people. Instead of emphasizing salvation as a way to escape eternal hell, Cho began to emphasize how God could help save people here and now. Cho incorporated both Roberts' thoughts about "a good God" and his own message of hope and prosperity based on 3 John 2. Cho acknowledged, "Interpreting the whole Bible through this verse, I came to understand that God reveals Himself as a living and doing God, who is not only for the past and the future but also for the present."<sup>26</sup>

This more positive message eventually became the core of Cho's preaching and ministry in what he developed as the "Threefold Blessing."<sup>27</sup> He asserted that God, who sacrificed his Son for his people on the cross, cannot be a cruel or fearsome God.<sup>28</sup> Because sin entered the world and affected the spirit, body, and environment, Jesus' redemptive work on the cross became a foundation of being blessed by Christ. He said, "through the blood of Jesus Christ, we have received the blessing of the threefold redemption in place of the threefold

curse”<sup>29</sup> Because salvation was spiritual, circumstantial, and physical, spiritual problems needed to be solved first before one can receive the blessings of health and prosperity.<sup>30</sup>

## The Concept of Blessing

The second concept that Cho gained from Roberts is his understanding of blessing. Roberts’ concept of God as a good God was accompanied by the conviction that God’s goodness was the basis by which a believer could have faith in God that he will provide for the believer’s needs. God is the God who responds with blessings to the earnest prayers of his people in poverty and in need.<sup>31</sup> This message was important to Cho, whose message of the gospel seemed disconnected from the impoverished reality of those he was trying to reach in that small tent church in 1958. After the Korean War, the socioeconomic situation of South Korea was cause for nothing but despair. The war had collapsed almost all industrial bases in Korea and had desolated its farming land. Most Koreans suffered from extreme poverty and even starvation. Cho realized that all his preaching about sin and punishment and the gospel of heaven and hell were not effective for those who were living in such a hopeless situation. He felt that the God he preached was only a God of the future and was far from the lives of the suffering people. Cho realized that those who lived in the reality of despair are indifferent to a God who exists only in the Bible and/or who judges the sins of people after death.<sup>32</sup> What Koreans needed at that time was not a philosophical and speculative theology, but the message that could give them strength and hope.

The message of the Threefold Blessing resonated deeply with the Korean people in their despair, sickness, and poverty and was the key factor that led to Cho’s phenomenal success. Cho reoriented his message to identify the needs of believers and to meet those needs. This message was highly effective because the Threefold Blessing answered the fundamental problems of people suffering from poverty and disease in the aftermath of the Korean War.<sup>33</sup> Allan Anderson identifies Cho’s message of the Threefold Blessing as an example of the effectiveness of contextual theology. He argues that Cho communicated with people in a way that entered into human life through the living Word of God.<sup>34</sup>



Cho was successful because he addressed the problems that Koreans faced, including salvation for the lost, material blessings for the poor, and healing for the sick.<sup>35</sup>

## Understanding of Healing

Oral Roberts was one of the most distinguished healing evangelists in the world. His message of healing spread around the world through tent crusades, magazines, television broadcasts, and publishing interests.<sup>36</sup> Roberts claimed, “I owe my life, my all to healing. I never wanted to be saved until I found out I could be healed.”<sup>37</sup> In saying this, Roberts attributed the origin and the foundation of his healing ministry to his own experience of divine healing.<sup>38</sup> At the height of Roberts’ healing ministry, Cho was planting a small church in a poor village on the outskirts of Seoul, along with Jashil Choi, his future mother-in-law, who had both recently graduated from seminary. At the opening service on May 18, 1958, Cho delivered his first sermon on healing, based on Mark 16:17, demonstrating how interested Cho was in the subject.<sup>39</sup>

Three factors enhanced Cho’s strong belief in healing miracles: his theological education at a Pentecostal Bible college, his personal healing experience, and his exposure to signs and wonders at the revival meetings in Seoul in October 1957, led by Harold Herman, where Cho participated as an interpreter.<sup>40</sup> Cho became focused on healing ministry because he recognized the only effective remedy for the poor who could not afford to see the doctor was to pray to God to heal their diseases. As the news that people were being healed in his meetings spread around the village, the number of people who attended the church increased. The congregation was still not vibrant, however. Cho still felt sluggishness in ministry when he encountered Roberts’ sermons and books.<sup>41</sup> In time, Roberts’ teaching helped Cho build and develop his own theology of the Threefold Blessing, Fivefold Gospel, and Fourth Dimensional Spirituality, which is acknowledged as a unique theological system of Korean Pentecostalism, and carried out a holistic healing ministry that included spiritual salvation, physical healing, and material blessing.

The difference between Cho’s view and Roberts’ was that where Roberts emphasized healing as the natural outflow of the goodness

of God, Cho emphasized the direct connection between healing and the atonement of Jesus Christ on the basis of Isaiah 53:4–6.<sup>42</sup> Cho understood healing as having more to do with Christ's suffering than his atonement. Drawing on Isaiah 53:5, Cho emphasized the suffering of Jesus as the means by which he relates to and alleviates the suffering of humanity from sickness and disease.<sup>43</sup> Rooting healing in the atonement, Cho also connected disease to sin because disease and death entered the world after the fall of humanity.<sup>44</sup> For this reason, Cho insisted that healing requires a process of repentance.<sup>45</sup> Therefore, Cho emphasized confession of sin, forgiveness of others, and holiness as necessary steps for receiving healing in addition to faith and trust in God.<sup>46</sup>

## Conclusion

This article has explored the significant impact Oral Roberts had upon Yonggi Cho's theology and ministry. Although they differ slightly in the application of their theological understanding within their own contexts, the theological commonalities between Roberts and Cho are discernable in their shared view of God as a good God. They both had an experience of divine healing and this personal experience of healing shaped their ministries and distinguished themselves as healing evangelists. Their success in their relative contexts had a profound influence that crossed the oceans into each other's context. Cho was able to contextualize Roberts' theology of blessing and healing in a way that addressed Korea's suffering from absolute poverty and despair in the aftermath of the Korean War. Roberts was able to take Cho's principles of vision and growth into America. The gospel of hope they shared has provided a Christian way of solving the various existential problems of those who face despair, illness, poverty, and death.



**Younghoon Lee** (nahyk80@gmail.com) serves as Senior Pastor of Yoido Full Gospel Church, Seoul, Korea, and General Superintendent of the Assemblies of God of Korea.

## Notes

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