

## **Pastor Hodong Hwang**

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### **<Short Bio>**

Being born and raised in South Korea, pastor Hodong Hwang began his career as a staff member of Inter-Varsity Christian Fellowship (IVF) in Korea. After engaging in college campus ministry through teaching, counseling, and building a faith community in college for three years, he had worked for different companies in the secular field closely related to his college major, electrical engineering, starting from a construction company and ending up with running his own company in the semiconductor industry.

In 2004, he came to the United States with his family to help his wife study her Th.M (Master of Theology) program. Then, he himself enrolled in the M.Div. (Master of Divinity) program of Vanderbilt Divinity School, while his wife pursued her Ph.D. program in the same school. His previous struggles of faith with various church corruption issues in his youth years, under the dictatorship in his college years, and his experiences in the jungle of the business world, led him to desire pursuing theological study.

He had served Korean Presbyterian Church in Nashville, TN, as an assistant pastor and an administrator for 4 years and was ordained in the Middle Tennessee Presbytery in 2013. After moving to Rochester, NY, following his wife who was hired by Colgate Rochester Crozer Divinity School as the New Testament professor, he served Mendon Presbyterian Church as a designated pastor for 5 years until the end of 2021. He then served two different churches, First Congregational United Church of Christ in Fairport, NY, and Rochester Korean Presbyterian Church as a temporary pastor.

### **<Statement of faith>**

To speak of my faith, it seems necessary to explain my faith journey briefly, which consists of three parts and overlaps at times.

The first part was when I spent my college years in a Christian group (Inter-Varsity) and a few more years as a staff member of the same organization. The theme I learned and found most intriguing during the period was the Kingdom of God of which I had never heard growing up in church. When I felt betrayed by church and almost gave up my faith because the pastor of the church in which I grew up was found guilty of criminal offenses such as embezzlement and sexual misconduct, the concept of the kingdom of God as the central theme of the Bible opened my eyes and helped me understand a new horizon of Christian faith beyond my understanding of Jesus as my personal Lord and Savior.

The second part involved social justice issues beginning with my struggle with faith under the dictatorship in 1980s in Korea, when the majority of churches turned a blind eye to obviously

heinous behaviors of the evil regime and even supported and blessed it just like the German churches did during the Nazi era. After entering the secular business world, I also encountered many corruption issues in the social system that exacerbated inequality, poverty, and social division of which I was also responsible. That period was the dark ages like the Middle Ages in my faith journey full of confusion, disappointments, and a sense of irrelevance.

The third part of my faith journey has been to incorporate my previous experiences and theology with the pastoral setting. After moving to the United States, I had a strong sense of God's calling that I should not just live in confusion avoiding the difficult questions about faith but have to revisit my previous experiences and struggles in order to discover new theological ideas. My interest and study naturally led me to the ideas of 'God's sovereignty as love initiative' more than anything else, the ministry of Jesus as representing who God really is, and the role of church as continuing the ministry of Jesus in the world.

### (1) God's sovereignty as love initiative and human sin

As a lifelong Presbyterian, God's sovereignty has been the central theme of my theological understanding. However, the relationship between God's sovereignty and God's intervention in human history seemed unrelated and ambiguous to me because God is complete in God-self lacking nothing and needing no human role to confirm it. But the God of love created humanity in God's image so that it could represent who God was and how God related to God's creation. Just like an artist cannot hold his/her ability in him/herself without making any artwork, God's sovereignty always has taken initiative in expressing God's love toward God's created world. When the characteristic of God's personality is love, God's sovereignty and God's love initiative are inseparable, especially for us who can only understand God's sovereignty through the expressed love as the recipients of it.

Human Sin is not just what we do against God's will, which deserves God's judgment, but also what destroys the image of God created in us and our ultimate satisfaction of life. Sin begins with human desires to pursue our own safety and prosperity without considering the image of God embedded in our spirit. Sin runs deep in human life to the extent that it promotes one's security at the cost of the insecurity of others, one's prosperity at the cost of the destruction of others' lives, and pursuing the collective power of those who share the same interest and goal to secure provision and wealth for them. As a result, humans exercise sin in ways to maximize its effect by making the system favorable and perpetual for them, as if they themselves become the creator and securer of their own security and prosperity without God. The Tower of Babel narrative in Genesis 11 is a symbolic presentation of the nature and direction of human sin. The system of sin that has been developed includes but is not limited to racism, sexism, hetero-sexism, nationalism, many kinds of discrimination against vulnerable people, animals, and nature. Naturally, it always considers to draw the line between insiders and outsiders, who are to be included and who are to be excluded.

### (2) Jesus as the clearest manifestation of God

The person and ministry of Jesus represents who God is and how God intervenes in human lives and in the sinful world. God's love did not begin with the baby in the manger but in eternity

with the creation of the world. Jesus Christ is not an accidental form of God's love but the ultimate form that has existed throughout history. God the creator has always intervened in human history in ways in which God's own pain and sacrifice are involved. The love of God is culminated in the death and resurrection of Jesus precisely because the immortal God was laid under the power of death so that the people laid under the power of death can be liberated from it.

The ways Jesus did his ministry showed how Jesus understood the sinful nature of the world. Jesus tackled many issues in which both individual and systematic sins were involved and gave his love to those who were victimized and marginalized by the system in the community. Jesus 'intentionally' healed the sick on the sabbath, even though they were not in a life-and-death situation. Jesus 'intentionally' mingled with the people in the margin making himself approachable for them, even learning from them like the case of the Syrophenician woman in Mark 7. The ministry of Jesus represented that Jesus Christ broke not only his own boundary to become incarnate but also the boundary of the system by which the ideas of inclusion/exclusion, purity/impurity, holiness/unholiness were laid out. Last year, I attended a synod conference and an instructor summarized the ministry of Jesus beautifully. He said, "What represents Jesus' ministry is the communion table, not the cross. The cross is the result of his ministry of communion, to share his body and blood for the people." With this understanding, the vague idea of "the Kingdom of God" in my 20s became more concretized as it involves the love flowing downward until it reaches everyone at the bottom and fills the entire created world.

### (3) The Holy Spirit and the church

The Holy Spirit, the Giver of Life, effectuates the love of God through Jesus Christ in people's lives and encourages humans to do good works, not only for Christians but non-believers as well. The providence of God is known to humans, both Christians and non-believers, through the inspiration and intervention of the Holy Spirit, helping them to taste and understand the goodness of God's presence in the world with or without them recognizing it. For Christians, the Holy Spirit works in ways to make the glory of God is revealed and understood in their hearts. The focus of the Holy Spirit is to remind God's people of the work of Jesus Christ so that they may continue his work in the world bringing people to the love of God.

Scripture is the word of God in ways that it not only provides us the right understanding of God and God's loving actions toward humanity and the created world, but also continues to illuminate the meaning of the word in our context and to help us respond to the needs of the people in our time. Thus, the Bible is not a manual book to instruct us about God's rules but a love letter that encourages us to converse with God through the Holy Spirit for flesh-and-blood Christian life. Above all, it should be noted that Jesus Christ who existed and ruled as the Word before the world was created (John 1:1), so Jesus Christ as the Word is the archetype of the written scriptures. Even though I just mentioned the Bible is a love letter to be freely interpreted and applied to our realities, such interpretations and applications need to be in harmony with the work of Jesus Christ and his examples of interpreting the scriptures (the prophets and the laws).

Churches in the world are to manifest the kingdom of God in the world by welcoming everyone regardless of their race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, age, etc. Even though churches are

not a political entity with the political agenda, its inward inclusiveness and outward mission inevitably contradict the worldly order thus are expected to face rejections. Though churches seem to face failures sometimes and to lose their reputations these days, we still have hope as we experience small, and often not so small, victories in our missions, trusting in the final victory of Jesus Christ in restoring God's whole creation. I call this the practices of winning through our worship, fellowship, and mission.