“March Forward to Hope”:
Yonggi Cho’s Pentecostal Theology of Hope

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Introduction

Many years ago, in one of my trips to the former Soviet Union—a neighboring country to my homeland, Finland—I visited a Children’s Hospital in the city of Jaroslavl. The director of the hospital took me to the second floor, into a room of 20–30 children all of whom were diagnosed with deadly cancer. Walking slowly from bed to bed, I saw starving, hopeless, suffering boys and girls. At one point, the medical doctor took onto his lap one of the cancer patients and told me: “This young man is not going to live many more days; probably he will be dead before you return home.” Then he looked at me and said something that has never left me: “Rev. Veli-Matti, you have come here to preach and teach about Christian religion. Let me ask you this one question: What is it that Christian faith has to offer this soon-to-die child, an innocent sufferer?” I was struck by the force of the question and could not say anything for a long while. Helpless and speechless, I whispered a prayer to God. Soon I heard one word coming out of my mouth: “Hope.” “Hope?” the doctor responded. “What do you mean?” My response was brief: “Unless there is hope beyond this suffering, there is no point in life at all.”

Out of three cardinal Christian virtues—faith, hope, and love—hope is the one that helps carry believers in the midst of the calamities and ambiguities of life. Like Abraham of old, Christians are often called to “hope against hope” (Rom. 4:18).

The Pentecostal theology and spirituality of Yonggi Cho can be described as an embodiment of hope that, coupled with faith and love, conquers the obstacles of life and reaches unto the throne of God Almighty. I chose for the title of my presentation the title of one of Cho’s books, a collection
of sermons, *March Forward to Hope*. In a sermon that gave title to the book, based on 2 Kings 7:3–8, Cho looks at the story of the famine in the city of Samaria, besieged by the Aramean army. In the spirit of Elijah, the hero of the story, Pastor Yonggi Cho urges Christians to keep on maintaining faith—and thus hope—even when everything in the circumstances speaks against it. “One must choose to believe!” “To have true faith is to choose to believe in the Word of God although darkness surrounds us and we can’t see, hear, or touch any evidence.”

What is the foundation of this kind of persistent faith and hope? It is not a quality of the human person per se, however strong he or she may be. It is not a result of mental exercise only. The foundation lies in the God, the God of Hope:

> But the voice of God will always give us endless faith and encouragement. All Christians should know the truth that though we are dwelling in the garment of the flesh, we have a future life in the Kingdom. With us is the Lord, the creator of heaven and earth, who sent His only Begotten Son to form the new covenant with us through His shed blood on the Cross. *This very God gives us faith, hope and love through the Word.*

Rather than getting depressed by the impossibilities of our circumstances, we are “supposed to make the best of our ill fortune in every kind of adversity knowing that God is with us always.” This is often evident in the book of Psalms, the hymn book of the people of God who looked upon God as the source of their trust and hope. As the German Lutheran theologian Wolfhart Pannenberg reminds us, in the prayers of the Psalms hope is always in God. Pannenberg also, in a helpful way, reminds us of the mutual relationship between faith and hope which I see so evident in Cho’s theology and proclamation: “The faith that has its basis in the promise of God and understands itself as trust in God and his promise is never apart from hope. The promise is indeed grounded in hope.” Faith as trust (as in trust towards another person who has given a promise) links naturally to hope in that both look to the future with expectation that the object of trust will prove to be constant and

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2 Cho, *March Forward to Hope*, 144.
5 Cho, *March Forward to Hope*, 149.
6 Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 3 (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1998), 174. He lists the following Psalms as examples: Pss. 25:2; 26:1; 28:7; 31:14; 32:10; 56:3; 62:8; 91:2, etc. (p. 174 n. 215).