

The Understanding of dynamic sanctification in the later days of John Wesley

: Focusing on "Sin in the Believer"¹

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I. Introduction

The Korean Evangelical Holiness Church (= KEHC) strives to "preach the gospel of Christ at home and abroad to save all souls, and to spread the grace of holiness, that is, the baptism of the Holy Spirit, to all members of the church to make the church holy."² It stands for the founding philosophy of the KEHC. Although all Christian churches regard holiness as an important religious value and content of the gospel, holiness in KEHC can be said to be the cornerstone that determines the identity of the church. The KEHC defines the doctrine of holiness in the Constitution as follows.

Article 18 (Holiness). It is the baptism of the Holy Spirit through Christ, which is an instantaneous experience through faith after being born again.

This grace cleanses us from original sin and sanctifies the person, giving them remarkable power to serve God (Acts 1:4,5, 15:8,9, 1:8; Luke 24:49). Just as faith is the only condition for a person's justification, so holiness is a grace obtained through faith alone (Romans 5:1; Acts 15:8; Galatians 3:4; 1 John 1:9).³

In the Constitution of the KEHC, holiness is defined as an "instantaneous experience that a Christian receives through faith" after being regenerated through the baptism of the Holy Spirit in Christ.⁴ It is emphasized that holiness is not created by man by his own ability, but is given to man only by the grace of God. However, in this way, sanctification is regarded as a rite of passage that one

¹ This is an English translation of the Korean article published in 'Theology and Mission' Vol. 58 (2020), 73-95.

² KEHC, 『Constitution』 (Seoul: KEHC Press, 2017), 9, Article 1, Paragraph 1.

³ Ibid., 16.

⁴ Insik Choi, "Comparative study of Wesleyan theology and holiness-Pentecostal theology in Korea: Wesleyan holiness-Pentecostal pneumatology as an integrative pneumatology", Korean Journal of Systematic Theology 57 (Seoul: The Korean Society for Systematic Theology, 2019), 309ff.

passes through in the Christian life, and it is regarded as a special experience in the past. After experiencing the grace of sanctification, there is a fear that it will be regarded as a static condition that is maintained inside of us even if we no longer pay attention to or strive for holiness. However, as the Constitution states that sanctification is understood as sanctifying a person and 'giving them remarkable ability to serve God', it is clear that sanctification cannot remain only as an experience of grace at a certain past point in time, or as an inner static state. This point is also conscious in the spirit of the Holiness Church. By introducing the point that John Wesley's dynamic understanding of holiness was emphasized in his later years, this paper hopes to bring attention to the dynamics of holiness within the KEHC.

II. Early Wesleyan Sanctification: 'Perfection Without Sin'?

A shift in emphasis in understanding of holiness is sensed in Wesley. In particular, when comparing the initial position and the later position, the change in emphasis is clearly visible. In order to reveal the position of the latter days more clearly, this paper will first briefly introduce Wesley's understanding of sanctification in the early years. Wesley's first official sermon after experiencing the dramatic conversion of Aldersgate was held at Oxford on June 11, 1738. The sermon was "Salvation by Faith," which was based on Ephesians 2:8 (by grace you have been saved through faith). Based on Wesley's own experience, this sermon shows what salvation is by faith.

In this sermon, Wesley emphasizes that Christians are saved from sin through faith. Salvation by faith frees and saves the Christian from sin. Wesley further elaborates on what salvation from sin is like. By faith Christians are 'saved from the guilt of sin and also from the power of sin.' By faith we are not only freed from the guilt of past sins, but we are now free from the dominion of sin. Thus, Wesley asserts that Christians do not sin. "... little children, let no man deceive you. he that committeth sin is of the devil. Whosoever believeth is born of God. And whosoever is born of God doth not commit sin; for his seed remaineth in him: and he cannot sin, because he is born of God."⁵

Wesley's later, in the middle, and especially in his later years, when he speaks of freedom from sin, makes a delicate distinction between sin, taking care that salvation from sin is not misunderstood as freedom and 'total' liberation from sin. However, early Wesley was very optimistic about the triumph of sin.

⁵ John Wesley, "Salvation by Faith", II. 5. <http://wesley.nnu.edu/john-wesley/the-sermons-of-john-wesley-1872-edition/sermon-1-salvation-by-faith/>

He that is, by faith, born of God sinneth not (1.) by any habitual sin; for all habitual sin is sin reigning: But sin cannot reign in any that believeth. Nor (2.) by any wilful sin: for his will, while he abideth in the faith, is utterly set against all sin, and abhorreth it as deadly poison. Nor (3.) By any sinful desire; for he continually desireth the holy and perfect will of God. and any tendency to an unholy desire, he by the grace of God, stifleth in the birth. Nor (4.) Doth he sin by infirmities, whether in act, word, or thought; for his infirmities have no concurrence of his will; and without this they are not properly sins. Thus, "he that is born of God doth not commit sin": and though he cannot say he hath not sinned, yet now "he sinneth not."⁶

Wesley seems to hold that in justification by faith after conversion, there is virtually complete liberation from all sin. And he even emphasizes that this is the salvation that can be obtained "even in the present world."⁷ In that respect, it seems to us that the Christian is in a state of "entire sanctification" in which he no longer sins after conversion.⁸

III. Sin remaining in the believer

Wesley, in a very strong tone, argued that believers do not sin. And this argument continued, albeit in a somewhat relaxed form. In particular, in his 1748 sermon, "The Great Privilege of Those who are Born of God", Wesley argued that justified and regenerated believers are endowed with the power not to sin by the grace of God. He said that this is a tremendous privilege that people who are born of God have received.⁹

⁶ Ibid., II. 6.

⁷ Ibid., II. 7.

⁸ Regarding entire sanctification, see Christopher T. Bounds, "Teaching on the complete sanctification of Wesleyan-Holiness tradition within the broad context of Wesleyan-Arminian," Translated by Young-Taek Kim, *Holiness Church and Theology* 22 (Bucheon: Institute of Contemporary Christian History, 2009), 61ff.

⁹ John Wesley, "The Great Privilege of Those That Are Born of God", II. 1ff.

<http://wesley.nnu.edu/john-wesley/the-sermons-of-john-wesley-1872-edition/sermon-19-the-great->

But the claim of grace-conferred power not to sin has caused controversy and confusion, not only among Wesley's opponents but also among his followers. Responding to this controversy and confusion, Wesley delivered a sermon in 1763 with a rather controversial title, "On Sin in Believers". According to Outler, the controversy and confusion arose from two camps: On the one hand were Calvinism and Lutheranism. 그리스도인의 삶에서 여전히 발견되는 죄의 현상 혹은 죄의 잔여와 관련하여, 루터주의자들은 칭의를 받은 신자에게 죄는 그리스도의 전가된 의에 의해 덮혀져 문제 없다고 주장한다. Regarding the phenomenon of sin still found in the Christian life, or 'remains of sin' (fomes peccati = fuse of sin), Lutherans assert that in the justified believer the sin is covered by the imputed righteousness of Christ. And Calvinists insist that complete freedom is achieved only in the state of glorification, emphasizing strict examination of conscience, repentance, and perseverance of the saints.¹⁰ Both Lutheranism and Calvinism take the pessimistic position that believers cannot be free from sin, and they are opposed to Wesley. However, Wesley criticizes that they emphasize the corruption of the believer's heart so much that they do not allow the believer to have sovereignty over the corruption of the heart, but rather subjugate it.¹¹

However, on the other hand, Moravian and some of Wesley's disciples were overly optimistic about Wesley's claim to the ability of God's children to not sin and understood it as the ability to remove all remnants of sin. So, they thought that the believer attains complete sanctification as sinless perfection.¹² Against them, Wesley criticizes them for the opinion "that even the corruption of nature is no more, in those who believe in Christ."¹³ Wesley preached "On Sin in Believer" to warn against these extremes. In other words, Wesley develops his own theory of sanctification while criticizing the two extremes of the theory of sin. In particular, Wesley in this sermon tried to correct the mistakes of those who claimed that there is no more sin in those who have been justified.¹⁴

privilege-of-those-that-are-born-of-god/

¹⁰ Outler's introduction to "On Sin in Believers," in: *The Works of John Wesley* (Abingdon Press, 1984), 1:314.

¹¹ John Wesley, "On Sin in Believers," l. 4. <http://wesley.nnu.edu/john-wesley/the-sermons-of-john-wesley-1872-edition/sermon-13-on-sin-in-believers/>

¹² Outler's introduction to "On Sin in Believers," 1:314.

¹³ John Wesley, "On Sin in Believers," l. 5.

¹⁴ Cf., Cho Jong-Nam, "Wesleyan Theology and the Korean Holiness Church," 『Wesleyan Holiness Movement in the Pacific Rim Era』 (Bucheon: Institute of Contemporary Christian History, 2006), 367ff.

Wesley points out in this sermon that sin does 'not reign but remains' in the believer. Of course, the 'believer' here is not the 'nominal Christian' that Wesley refers to, but the 'true Christian' who was justified and regenerated. Even if a person believes in Jesus Christ, is converted, received the grace of justification and received the grace of regeneration, and of course, even if he is not in a state of falling away from that grace, it can be said that 'sin is' in the believer. Of course, Wesley here understands the sentence that 'sin is' not in the sense of that 'sin reigns', but in the sense of that 'sin remains'. In other words, Wesley sees that the 'remnants of sin have an effect' that remains in the believer's heart, even though the 'control of sin' is broken in the believer who is converted through the grace of Christ. Let's take a closer look at Wesley's understanding of 'sin' after conversion, and we will see what this means for Wesley's understanding of holiness.

IV. Sin after justification

In this sermon, Wesley addresses the question of sin after justification, namely the question: "... [I]s a justified or regenerate man freed from all sin as soon as he is justified[?] is there then no sin in his heart -- nor ever after, unless he fall from grace[?]"¹⁵ What Wesley is dealing with here is not the unregenerate believer, the "nominal" believer. The believers he deals with here are those who have been great and gloriously 'justified'. He has been regenerated in Christ and has received the grace of holiness. "He is washed, he is sanctified. His heart is purified by faith; he is cleansed 'from the corruption that is in the world;' 'the love of God is shed abroad in his heart by the Holy Ghost which is given unto him."¹⁶ He is a person who keeps the commandments of God and does what pleases God. "And he has power both over outward and inward sin, even from the moment he is justified."¹⁷ He received the grace and power of holiness.

However, Wesley understands the present existence of the regenerated believer considering the apostle Paul's words, "For the flesh sets its desire against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh; for these are in opposition to one another, so that you may not do the things that you please." (Galatians 5, 17). This verse does not describe the state of a nominal believer, but rather describe the general state of a regenerated believer, showing that even in a regenerated person there are two opposing forces. Wesley argues that in the believer, the flesh and the spirit, the lust (evil nature)

¹⁵ John Wesley, "On Sin in Believers," II. 3.

¹⁶ Ibid., II. 4.

¹⁷ Ibid.

and the Holy Spirit are opposing each other.¹⁸ This isn't just Paul's point of view, it's an insight into humanity that flows so closely through the Bible, Wesley says, that most of the Bible's exhortations are aimed at this very situation.

Therefore, even the believers "continually feel an heart bent to backsliding; a natural tendency to evil; a proneness to depart from God, and cleave to the things of earth."¹⁹ In addition to this tendency toward sin, they experience inward sin, "sin remaining in their heart, - pride, self-will, unbelief" in our daily lives. "Yet at the same time they 'know that they are of God.'"²⁰ Awareness of this double situation in the believer is a general phenomenon of true believers.

If that were the case, the question would inevitably arise as to whether the indwelling of Christ in such a believer was possible. Wesley answers that Christ can dwell in the sinful heart of the believers, asserts that if it were not possible, man could not be saved.²¹ Of course, the fact that there is 'sin' in the heart doesn't mean that sin reigns. "Christ indeed cannot reign, where sin reigns; neither will he dwell where any sin is allowed. But he is and dwells in the heart of every believer, who is fighting against all sin; although it be not yet purified, according to the purification of the sanctuary."²² A situation in which sin dominates is a state in which there is no protest against sin. The warfare against sin taking place in the believer's heart should be regarded as the "normal" situation of the true believer, in which two antagonistic forces of sin and the spirit are at war. In that respect, the claim that man is without sin from the moment he is justified must be rejected. This is because the inner sin of man, which the Holy Spirit opposes in the believer, actually exists. In other words, Wesley makes it clear that when man is regenerated and justified, he is not set free from 'all' sins.

V. Partial Sanctification

¹⁸ Cf. *Ibid.*, III. 1.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, III. 7.

²⁰ *Ibid.* "Inward sin" means to Wesley "any sinful temper, passion, or affection; such as pride, self-will, love of the world, in any kind or degree; such as lust, anger, peevishness; any disposition contrary to the mind which was in Christ." (*Ibid.*, II. 2) On the other hand, "outward sin" is understood by Wesley to refer to the actual practice of sin, such as "fornication, idolatry, and drunkenness." (*Ibid.*, IV. 1)

²¹ *Ibid.*, III. 8.

²² *Ibid.*

Biblical expressions that describe the changes that occur when a believer is justified appear to refer to the believer's integrity. Every Believer "is clean, is holy, is sanctified, is pure in heart, has a new heart, is a temple of the Holy Ghost", a spiritual being and a new creation.²³ One could argue from these passages of scripture that there is no sin in the believer and that he is made holy. However, Wesley asserts that although a believer may be a spiritual person, he may not be 'totally' spiritual, and that a believer is renewed but not 'totally' renewed, and this is possible for the "babes in Christ".²⁴ Following the same logic, Wesley asserts that a person can be both sanctified and unsanctified at the same time. In the case of the Corinthians, it is because they were cleansed from their outward sins but not from inward sins.²⁵ "Hence, although even babes in Christ are **sanctified**, yet it is only **in part**."²⁶

According to Wesley, the believer is truly new, but not entirely new. The inner sinful inclination, the carnal heart, was crucified, but not completely annihilated. Thus, the affections and lusts remain in the believer, and they often struggle to get out of the cross.²⁷ The believer becomes a new creature and a new person, but not entirely new, so he feels, "to his sorrow and shame, remains of the old man, too manifest taints of his former tempers and affections."²⁸

Given this reality, Wesley says:

He [= the Believer] is saved from sin; yet not entirely: It remains, though it does not reign. If you think it does not remain, ... you certainly have not considered the height, and depth, and length, and breadth of the law of God
...²⁹

Wesley defines the concept of sin and salvation from sin in more detail to facilitate the consideration of this serious existential situation of the believer. Wesley distinguishes between three types of use

²³ Ibid., IV. 1f.

²⁴ Ibid., IV. 1.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid., V. 1. (Emphasis by me)

²⁷ Ibid., IV. 8.

²⁸ Ibid., IV. 2.

²⁹ Ibid., IV. 3.

of sin in terms of its effect on man. First, there is the 'dominance' of sin, or the 'power' of sin, which subjugates humans to sin and makes them slaves to sin. Second, there is the 'guilty' in which human beings must bear severe responsibility for the sins committed by submitting to them. Third, there is the 'existence' of sin that remains in the believer as a remnant of sin or a fuse of sin in the believer even while the power of sin and the condemnation are nullified by Christ. However, in Wesley, the expression 'existence' of sin does not seem appropriate because it is ambiguous what kind of 'sin' it refers to. It should be seen as referring to the 'inward' sin, which he refers to as the sin that remains in the heart, the inclination of the heart to fall away from God.³⁰ Wesley saw the most representative of this inner sin as the lusts of the flesh. In any case, Wesley believed that the above three concepts of sin, "the guilt, the power, and the being" of sin, should be distinguished.³¹ Without that conceptual distinction, the 'sin of the believer' cannot be understood. Wesley explains the phenomenon of sin in the believer under this distinction of the concept of sin as follows.

[We allow] [that] believers are delivered from the guilt and power of sin...; [we deny] that they are delivered from the being of it... ... A man may have the Spirit of God dwelling in him, and may "walk after the Spirit," though he still feels "the flesh lusting against the Spirit."³²

Partial sanctification, partial perfection, that is, the remaining 'existence of sin', does not decisively hinder Christian existence and lead to despair and defeat. Wesley argues that even though the existence of sin is present in the believer's life, and thus the believer feels the lust of the flesh against the Spirit, and the conflict between the Spirit and the lust of the flesh has caused the believer to experience an inner conflict that is uncomfortable and shameful. However, it was believed that holiness among believers was maintained. "And they are likewise holy and undefiled, while they 'walk after the Spirit,' although sensible there is another principle in them, and that 'these are contrary to each other.'"³³

VI. Struggle against sin

³⁰ Cf., *Ibid.*, III. 1, 7.

³¹ *Ibid.*, IV. 4: "The guilt is one thing, the power another, and the being yet another."

³² *Ibid.*

³³ *Ibid.*, IV. 6.

Wesley explains how believers can 'experientially' maintain holiness by dealing with the existence of sin. In a believer's heart, it is often experienced really that the desires of the Holy Spirit and the desires of the flesh exist simultaneously and oppositely. But what matters is who having the upper hand. For example, "but some pride and anger may be in that heart, where there is much humility and meekness."³⁴ In other words, what is important in the praxis of the believer's life in relation to the being of sin is to manage the sin not surpassing the Holy Spirit.³⁵

Of course, at this time, if the existence of sin not only opposes the Holy Spirit, but surpasses Him, and thus the believer yields to sin, the believer will not only have the existence of sin but also the guilt and power of sin, and then he cannot escape God's condemnation. Unregenerated unbelievers obey sin, but regenerated believers do not obey sin.³⁶ Thus, Wesley says, the doctrine that 'there is sin in the believer' does not "encourage to obey sin, but to resist it with all our might."³⁷

But the believer need not be too afraid of the dominance and power of sin. Wesley asserts that the dominion of sin was controlled by Christ, and that Christ's victory over the dominion of sin was promised and realized in the justified believer.

*The usurper is dethroned. He remains indeed where he once reigned; but remains in chains. So that he does, in some sense, "prosecute the war," yet he grows weaker and weaker; while the believer goes on from strength to strength, conquering and to conquer.*³⁸

Although Satan was brought down from the position of ruler over man by Christ, he still remains with man and is waging a battle on man. But he remains "in chains" and is wrestling with the Holy Spirit in the believer. In other words, Christians are cleansed at the moment of true faith in Christ, but not completely cleansed at the same time, so when the flesh and evil nature remaining in the believer are fighting against the Holy Spirit, Christians have to fight the good fight of faith

³⁴ Ibid., IV. 10.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Ibid., IV. 12.

³⁷ Ibid., IV. 13.

³⁸ Ibid., IV. 11.

with all their might, to pray and put on the full armor of God to fight.³⁹

VII. Entire sanctification

Wesley argues that the believer should not be content and complacent in the spiritual battle that maintains the situation of partial sanctification, but should seek entire sanctification that completely annihilates the remaining existence of sin in the believer. This claim and exhortation to full sanctification is found in Wesley's sermon, "The Repentance of Believers", published in 1767, four years after Wesley's sermon, "Sin in the Believer" (1763). Wesley argues that since there is sin remaining in the believer, the believer needs a new level of 'faith and repentance' after believing the gospel, that is, even after being justified, which is different from what was needed when first believing the gospel.⁴⁰ In other words, for the sake of the entire sanctification that solves the problem of remaining sin in the believer, those who have already become believers still need repentance and faith, just as they needed repentance and faith when they became believers from unbelievers. In that sense, Wesley does not demand repentance toward unbelievers here, but urges 'repentance toward believers.' Believers must still repent and have the corresponding faith. Of course, the goal of believers' repentance is entire sanctification.

Wesley asserts that if a believer has considered the seriousness of the problem of sin remaining in the believer, the person who is faced with the 'soul trouble' within him can only be interested in and aspire to 'entire sanctification'.⁴¹ A believer who has a recognition of sin "weakened indeed, but not destroyed", who has consciousness of a depth of sin, he can not but "groan, for a full deliverance, to him that is mighty to save."⁴²

Wesley argues that the believer, in order to make the leap from partial sanctification to entire sanctification, needs a second new grace, not the grace he already had when he is first born again.

By all the grace which is given at justification we cannot extirpate them [= the

³⁹ Ibid., V. 2.

⁴⁰ John Wesley, "The Repentance of Believers", 3. <http://wesley.nnu.edu/john-wesley/the-sermons-of-john-wesley-1872-edition/sermon-14-the-repentance-of-believers/>

⁴¹ Ibid., III. 2.

⁴² Ibid., III. 2.

*remaining sins]. Though we watch and pray ever so much, we cannot wholly cleanse either our hearts or hands. Most sure we cannot, till it shall please our Lord to speak to our hearts again, to speak **the second time**, "Be clean:" ... Then only, the evil root, the carnal mind, is destroyed; and inbred sin subsists no more.⁴³*

At the same time, Wesley believes that this second shift toward entire sanctification will occur by "instantaneous deliverance" besides (or rather than) by "gradual work of God."⁴⁴ And he expects this whole transformation of sanctification to take place in the world while we live.⁴⁵ Wesley, then, seems to be thinking of complete sanctification of complete freedom from remaining sin in Christian reality in an instant and in the world.

However, I believe that this radical and present view of the entire sanctification shown in "Repentance of Believers" can be interpreted somewhat rhetorically. In this article, Wesley does not attempt to establish the entire sanctification as a current task at hand, but by sparking 'interest' in it, emphasizing its 'necessity', and arousing 'desire' for it. This can be seen as an attempt to warn the Calvinists and Lutherans who are not interested in the radical transformation but remain in status quo. Kenneth Collins also points out that the concept of perfection in Wesleyan theology should not be understood as a static concept. "... In Wesleyan theology, there is no spiritual concept of 'we have already reached'. ... Christian perfection is not a static perfection, but a dynamic perfection, the most abundant of divine love."⁴⁶

In the sermon "Sin in the Believer", the view of entire sanctification is different. Of course, in this sermon, the expression 'entire sanctification' does not appear directly, but Wesley's view regarding the realization of entire sanctification can be derived. Entire sanctification, that is, liberation from all remnants of sin and the full realization of spotless cleanliness, is addressed in terms of progressive eschatological tensions. The power of Satan who, being "chained in chains," but opposes us, is weakening, while the believer continues to triumph and becomes stronger and stronger and finally conquers it completely.⁴⁷ It reveals Wesley's view of whole sanctification from a 'gradual' perspective.

⁴³ Ibid., I. 20.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Ibid., III. 3.

⁴⁶ Kenneth Collins, 『John Wesley's Theology: Holy Love and Grace』, translated by Se Hyung Lee (Seoul: KMC, 2012), 420.

⁴⁷ John Wesley, "On Sin in Believers," IV. 11.

In addition, regarding the viewpoint claiming the eschatological viewpoint of entire sanctification, Wesley expresses the eschatological tension, the viewpoint of 'not yet'. "...Christ gave himself for the Church, that it might be holy and without blemish." (Eph. 5:25, 27.) "And so it will be in the end: But it **never** was **yet**, from the beginning to this day."⁴⁸ In this respect, it can be said that Wesley's entire sanctification still depicts the dynamic Christian life situation more realistically than the interest in depicting the still state of the Christian life.

VIII. Conclusion

For Wesley, the concept of holiness was understood so radically that it was initially misunderstood as 'sinless perfection.' However, going to the latter days, Wesley has a multi-dimensional and dynamic understanding of the issue of holiness, focusing on the actual sin that exists in the regenerated believer while focusing on the analysis of the actual existence of Christians. Its dynamism is revealed in the inner struggle between sin and the spirit within the believer. The battle does not happen because the Holy Spirit has departed from the believer. Rather, it is a battle and conflict that started because the Holy Spirit indwells believers. If the Holy Spirit was not present on the believer, there would be no conflict in the first place. Because he is already under the dominion of sin, he enjoys peace without internal conflict. Of course, the name of a believer would not be worthy of him. Until the battle between the spirit and the remnants of sin in the believer comes to a complete conclusion, the believer must be awake and long for the presence of the Holy Spirit and the help of Christ more intensely.

At this point, the filling of the Holy Spirit and 'baptism of the Holy Spirit' should be understood as holiness.⁴⁹ When the KEHC discusses the baptism of the Holy Spirit aimed at entire sanctification in the sense of the fight against sin, it will productively obtain richer implications for holiness and the Holy Spirit.

⁴⁸ Ibid., IV. 8. (Emphasis by me)

⁴⁹ For a biblical theological study of the baptism of the Holy Spirit in relation to holiness, refer to the following. Dong Soo Kim, "Biblical Understanding of Holiness Theory of the Korean Holiness Church: Holiness as Baptism in the Holy Spirit," 『Holiness Church and History』 2 (Anyang: Holiness Church and History Research Institute, Holiness University, 2000), especially 36f.