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# Well-being Syndrome in Korea: a View from the Perspective of Biblical Counselling

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**KEYWORDS:** *Consumerism, health, hedonism, desire, morality, industrialism, cosmetic industry, food industry, class, chemyun culture, counselling, self-love*

## I. Introduction

Alvin Tofler wrote in his book, *The Third Wave*, about the end of industrialism and the beginning of a new civilization. According to Tofler, the first wave was the agricultural revolution which took place ten thousand years ago and the second wave was the industrial revolution which began in 1750. The third wave, which began in 1955, has been described in many ways, including the space age, information age, electronic era, global village, and super-industrial society.<sup>1</sup>

What then is the next wave that will impact our society? Paul Zane Pilger predicts a 'well-being revolution' as the next wave. According to Pilger, the well-being phenomenon will change the current social structure as well as individuals. It will bring a global change of consumer culture and new industries and products with a big market. In 2001, he claimed, the volume of products and markets related to well-being in the U.S.A. was 230 billion dollars.<sup>2</sup>

The well-being revolution is happening in Korea too, in a massive way. In 2002, Korean mass media began to use the word 'well-being' and before long this concept drew a great deal of attention from the general population. The term began to be used widely, such

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1 Alvin Tofler, *The Third Wave* (New York: Morrow, 1980), translated by Je Chun Yu (Seoul: Joo Woo, 1981), pp. 26-7.

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2 Young Han Kim & Hee Jung Im, *Well-being Marketing* (Seoul: Dasan Book, 2004), pp. 16-17,

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as 'well-being food', 'well-being clothes', 'well-being house', 'well-being travel', 'well-being resort', 'well-being cosmetics', etc. and collectively, a 'well-being lifestyle'. This concept includes the notions that 'health is the number one priority' and one should 'pursue quality of living'. This is a new social phenomenon.<sup>3</sup>

It seems that well-being has become almost everyone's goal in life. The current available studies about well-being mainly relate to consumer marketing, or management, and fail to delve deeply into the underlying nature of this well-being movement. Therefore, it is necessary to study the meaning of well-being which is implied in the cultural aspect of social interaction. As Christians, what should we do about this well-being syndrome? Christianity has existed in relationship with culture. The gospel was delivered in the context of a particular culture and continues to be delivered in the context of many different cultures. It has changed old cultures and created new cultures. As such, Christians ought to understand the culture in which they are engaged. In this article, concepts and theories of well-being will be examined and also a view through biblical counselling will be discussed.

## II. The Concept of 'Well-being'

In 1948, WHO defined 'health' as follows: 'Health is a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity.'<sup>4</sup> Then, what is 'well-being'? According to Webster's dictionary, the definition of 'well-being' is 'the state of being happy, healthy, or prosperous'.<sup>5</sup>

From a philosophical point of view, the concept of well-being can be seen as what is ultimately good for a person. Often, the term 'well-being' is associated with good health. That being said, health, while very important for my well-being, may not be all that matters for my well-being. We use the term, 'happiness' to refer to a short-lived state of a person, such as a feeling of contentment. For example, we say, 'You look happy today.' When we discuss, however, what makes life good for the individual living that life, it is better to use the term, 'well-being' instead of 'happiness'.

Well-being is generally about what is good for one's person. Thus, it is often related to 'self-interest', which is the interest of myself, and not others. Sometimes, however, this principle breaks down in light of certain ethical theories which challenge this notion that one's self-interest is all that matters. In Aristotle's view, for example, if a friend's well-being is closely bound

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3 Mee Sook Lee, 'Looking at Well-being in terms of Lifestyle: Healthy or Trendy?', Department of Sociology, PaiChai University, Summer Symposium of Korean Life Science Society, 2004, p. 477.

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4 Hoon Chul Kim, *Well-being Marketing* (Seoul: Come On Books, 2004), p. 12.

5 *Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary* (Springfield: Merriam-Webster, 2004), 'well-being'.

up with mine, it is possible for the distinction between what is good for me and what is good for other person to break down. In this situation, my friend could be regarded as 'another self', so that what is good for my friend is also good for me. But this notion should be taken 'either as a metaphorical expression of the dependence claim, or as an identity claim which does not threaten the notion of well-being'.<sup>6</sup>

### III. Theories of Well-being

#### Hedonism

According to 'evaluative hedonism', well-being consists in the greatest balance of pleasure over pain. Well-being means what is good for me, and pleasure seems good to me. If a person has more pleasantness in his life, it will be better. If he encounters more painfulness, it will be worse. How can we measure these two? According to Jeremy Bentham, the central measurements are their duration and their intensity.<sup>7</sup>

One argument against hedonism is the 'experience machine' objection. Suppose there is a machine which gives you any experience that you desire. You can plug into the machine for life, and have pre-programmed experiences of happiness. But the problem is that after you plug into the machine, you do not know you are attached to the machine. You think it is actually happening but it is not real.

The argument is that if happiness were the ultimate good, you would want to plug into the machine. But if you think you should not, then happiness is not the ultimate good.<sup>8</sup> In response to this argument, hedonists might insist that their theory rests on 'common sense' intuition. They will also point out the 'paradox of hedonism', that pleasure is most effectively pursued indirectly. If a person consciously tries to maximize his own pleasure, he cannot immerse himself in those activities, such as reading or playing games, which actually give him pleasure.

#### Desire Theories

On the experience machine, many of your desires are likely to remain unfulfilled in reality. For example, if you desire to write a great novel, you may believe that you are writing a great novel if you are hooked up to the experience machine, but in fact it is only a hallucination. Your desire is to write a great novel in fact, not necessarily to have the experience of writing a great novel. The experience machine objection is one of the reasons for the emergence of desire theories. But the main reason for the current dominance of desire theories is the emergence of welfare economics. Economists see people's well-being as consisting in the satisfaction of preferences or desires. This made possible the ranking of preferences, and methods for assessing the value of preference-satisfaction. One of the popular standards is money.

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6 Roger Crisp, 'Well-being' in *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*; available from <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/well-being/>

7 Crisp, 'Well-being'.

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8 Brad Thompson, 'PHIL 1318: Contemporary Moral Problems'; available from <http://faculty.smu.edu/bthompso/lecture6.pdf>

### Objective List Theories

These theories list items constituting well-being that consist neither merely in pleasurable experience nor in desire-satisfaction, such as knowledge or friendship. The list should include everything good. According to the theory of perfectionism, which has influenced objective list theories, what makes things constituents of well-being is their ability to 'perfect' human nature. But how can we decide what goes on the list? The best we can do is to deliver a reflective judgement, or rely on intuition. Because of this, objective theories can be regarded as less satisfactory than the other two theories. But those theories also can be based on reflective judgement. Objective list theories are the strongest defence available to hedonists who attempt to undermine the evidential weight of our natural beliefs about what is good for people.<sup>9</sup>

### Well-being and Morality

There are views that take the position that well-being is all that matters morally. One such view is 'welfarism'. To explain welfarism, Roger Crisp quotes Joseph Raz's 'humanistic principle': 'the explanation and justification of the goodness or badness of anything derives ultimately from its contribution, actual or possible, to human life and its quality'.<sup>10</sup> If we expand this principle, it becomes welfarism, according to which the justificatory

force of any moral reason rests on well-being. This view poses a problem for those who believe that morality can require actions which benefit no one, and harm some, such as punishments. The ancient moral philosopher's central question was, 'Which life is best for one?' The rationality of egoism was assumed. But morality is thought to concern the interests of others. One way to defend morality is to claim that a person's well-being is in some sense constituted by his virtue or the exercise of virtue.<sup>11</sup>

### IV. Well-being and Korean Society

The majority of Koreans who pursue this ideal of well-being are relatively younger than those in the United States and Japan—they are usually in their 20s and 30s. What they seek is more than just a healthy body. They emphasize even more a 'leisurely mind'. They are concerned not only about food and exercise to be healthier. They are even more concerned about housing and environment so they can have a leisurely mind. Well-being culture affects not only one's choice in eating but also what to do in one's whole life.<sup>12</sup>

### Industrial Changes Due to Well-being Syndrome

Young Ho Han categorized a number of 'well-being' trends or industries in

9 Crisp, 'Well-being'.

10 Joseph Raz, *The Morality of Freedom* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986), p. 194; quoted in Crisp, "Well-being".

11 Crisp, 'Well-being'.

12 Jae Ho Choi, *Public Culture and Biblical World View* (Seoul: Ye Young Communication, 2003), pp. 13-19.

Korea. They are the 'health care industry', 'cosmetic and beauty industry', 'food processing industry', 'food distribution and dining industry', 'electronics and electric appliance industry', 'building and housing industry', and 'clothing industry'.

**Health Care Industry:** Health has been a great concern of people for a long time. But it has become an even greater concern as a result of this well-being syndrome. One trend in the well-being health industry is the increasing service industry which takes care of health itself rather than just selling health products. Fitness centres and hospitals have surpassed their traditional roles. California Fitness Center, for example, which was introduced in 2000, provides expensive machines and expert trainers so clientele can seek to build the perfect body. Well Park Hospital in Yang Pyung applies the concepts of rest and leisure as a part of its health examination process.

**Cosmetic and Beauty Industry:** One of the trends in this area is the merger of food and beauty. Beauty industries present 'beauty food' which has progressed from general health-supporting food to special food specifically addressed to beauty care.

**Food Processing Industry:** This industry, along with the food distribution and dining industry, is perhaps one of the most sensitive industries to the well-being trend. This is more directly related to health than any other area. It is no longer true that inexpensive and tasty food is the best. Some cheap food, while tasty, can be toxic. In this era, people are paying more attention to what they are eating than any other time.

**Food Distribution and Dining Indus-**

**try:** Larger industries represent the old industrial era and smaller unions represent the new well-being era. In this era, success is not dependent on the size of industry but on the quality it provides. Because of mad cow disease, fast food industries have greatly suffered. Thus they tried to overcome this crisis with the 'well-being fast food'. Recently, well-being hamburgers (fat free) appeared at fast food stores.

**Electronics and electric appliance industry:** As people's concern about well-being increases, companies are promoting 'well-being electronics and electric appliances', using high technology.

**Building and Housing Industry:** As the well-being culture is expanding, the demand for pro-environmental building materials is increasing. It has become popular to build in apartment complexes not only a fitness centre but also rock or wall-climbing courses on the outside wall of an apartment building, making sports and recreation available within a stone's throw of one's place of residence.

**Clothing and Textile Industry:** Well-being consumers are interested in clothing not only for their appearance but also as good for their health. Responding to the wishes of mothers wanting to raise well-being babies, companies are even making infants' clothing using materials from organic farms where chemicals are not used in cultivating plants.<sup>13</sup>

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13 Young Ho Han, 'The Concept of Well-being Trend and the Analysis of Consumer Trend, in the Current Society' (M A Thesis: Chung Ang University, 2004), pp. 12-27.

## Social Influence of Well-being Syndrome

The popularization of the concept of well-being through mass media has helped to cause a fast expansion of the social recognition about health and quality of life. Mass media actively functions as a research tool because it offers various items of information, and thus it has a positive function. However, on the negative side, mass media has produced a term, the 'well-being tribe', which means 'rich people' and the commercialism behind 'well-being' causes people to spend money extravagantly. The hot wind of well-being positively brought improvement of health and quality of life, but negatively brought a danger to individuals and the society.

In a sense, well-being is not anything new. Even in the past, rich people pursued a lifestyle that the well-being followers aspire to nowadays, but lower class and lower middle class people could not do the same. As industrial development took place, the incomes of people increased and the well-being kind of lifestyle became available to lower class and lower middle class. Therefore, well-being is not a totally new lifestyle but a basic human desire, to 'eat well and live well' which is popularized and commercialized.<sup>14</sup>

The current concept of well-being raises a thought in people's minds: 'What if you don't have money and you cannot enjoy a healthy life?' It makes people who cannot afford it anxious. Some people work day and night,

harming their health to buy well-being health products. Well-being now creates social disharmony between classes and commercialism, thereby distorting the good intention of the original meaning.

## Che Myun Culture and Well-being

Korean people are accustomed to *chemyun* culture. 'Che' means body and 'myun' means face. *Chemyun* means honour, dignity or reputation. If you lose face, you can say you lose your *chemyun*. You must show people some dignity to save face. This is important because you don't want to be ashamed; you want to have self-respect. The emphasis is more on other people's opinions about you rather than virtue or value in yourself.<sup>15</sup>

Talking about approval of others, Kyu Tae Lee explained, 'Because of *chemyun*, sometimes you have to refrain from eating when you are starving, and you have to eat even when your stomach is full. Sometimes, you cannot put on more clothes even when you are freezing, and you cannot take off your clothes when you are sweating. Besides, you cannot cry or laugh in response to those things happening.'<sup>16</sup>

In *chemyun* culture, it is a virtue to refrain from boasting about oneself, but people, deep inside, want to be admired and envied. So they try to have what others recognize and to do what others approve. Such behaviours rep-

14 Hoon Chul Kim, 'The Concept of Well-being Trend', pp. 20-21.

15 Sang Jin Choi, *Korean Psychology* (Seoul: Chung Ang University, 2000), p. 174.

16 Kyu Tae Lee, *Korean's Way of Thinking* (Vol. 3), (Seoul: Shin Won, 1983), p. 291.

resent their desire for psychological satisfaction through their superiority being recognized by others.<sup>17</sup> Many well-being people seem to buy things over their budget to show off and not to feel cheap. From *chemyun* culture, the tendency to conceal one's desire decreased and the tendency to show off increased.

## V. Well-being and Biblical Counselling

### The Principles of Biblical Counselling

It is a worthwhile exercise to survey some biblical counselling principles so that we can understand the biblical approach to the well-being syndrome.

#### The Human being is created in God's image

The existence and life of human beings is supposed to depend upon God. In the second chapter of Genesis, the Lord spoke to the first man and guided him on how to live. Without God's counsel, human beings cannot live a life in the way proper to the purpose of creation.

#### The Human being fell and is corrupted

Human beings used to live according to God's counsel only. But another counsellor came to them and they followed the counsel other than the Creator's (Genesis 3). Disobedience to the Lord is the beginning of tragedy. Human beings are totally corrupted, and with-

out the Redeemer's grace cannot be saved or restored to the way intended by God in his creation.

#### The Human problem is the problem of the human heart

In the Gospel of Mark, the Pharisees criticized Jesus: 'Why don't your disciples live according to the tradition of the elders instead of eating their food with unclean hands?' (Mk. 7: 5). Jesus replied, 'You have a fine way of setting aside the commands of God in order to observe your own tradition' (7: 9). Later, he said to his disciples, 'Don't you see that nothing that enters a man from the outside can make him unclean? For it doesn't go into his heart but into his stomach and then out of his body' (7:18-19). The human heart is the centre of human behaviour. The purpose of counselling is change. Without change of heart, there is no real change of a person and his life.

Usually people blame their problems on the situations around them. But the main reason for the problems is their heart responding to those situations. What occupies your heart will control your behaviour, and who or what you worship will dominate your heart. In Numbers chapter 11, we can see an example. When the rabble with the people of Israel began to crave other food, the Israelites started complaining and said, 'If only we had meat to eat!' (Num. 11: 4). This was the beginning of a long period of trouble for the Israelites.

#### Principles and Methods of counselling come from the Bible

Without the Word of God, we can neither understand nor change the heart

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<sup>17</sup> Sang Jin Choi, *Korean Psychology*, p. 268.



of a human being. It is said in Hebrews 4:12, 'For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart.' The Bible is the main tool for both diagnosis and treatment.<sup>18</sup>

## Biblical Issues about Well-being Syndrome

### Well-being as a Culture around Christians

Like other people, Christians also live in a culture. What should we do about the culture around us? In this world things are hardly neutral. Christ said, 'He who is not with me is against me' (Mt. 12:30). For example, language as individual words and the sounds that they make are neutral, but when it is employed, language always conveys some kind of meaning and is no longer neutral. Paul Tripp suggests that there are certain things we must acknowledge as we think about the institutions, relationships, media, and products of the culture around us:

- All things that God created are good.
- All things that we encounter have been put together, or are used, in a way that carries meaning.
- Everything can be used for good or evil.
- Everything in culture expresses the perspectives of the creator and/or user

- We never find things in the culture around us in a neutral context or setting.<sup>19</sup>

The well-being syndrome, as a culture, has to be seen in relation to God. Well-being people can be either glorifying God or worshipping an idol.

### Self-love in the Pursuit of Well-being

Taking care of one's health is not necessarily a sin. In Ephesians 5:29, it is said, 'After all, no one ever hated his own body, but he feeds and cares for it, just as Christ does the church.' You should take good care of your body to glorify God. However, if you do that for your own glory, not his, you are worshipping an idol.

If you are pursuing your own well-being at the cost of others' well-being, you are doing it for selfish reason. Some might say, 'What is wrong with loving my self?' Some people even teach self-love from the Lord's commandment, 'Love your neighbor as yourself!' (Mt. 19:19). They say, 'Right, to love your neighbour is good, but to love him as yourself, you must love yourself first.'

It seems very logical, but the problem is that we love ourselves too much already. I asked people whenever I lecture on this subject if there is anyone who loves his neighbour to more than half of the level to which he loves himself. So far, no one has answered that he does! To love yourself is good, but to love yourself so much that you do not love others is a problem. It is said in the

<sup>18</sup> Kyu Myeong Whang, 'Counseling and Pastoral Practice', *The Bible and Counseling*, Journal of Biblical Counseling, (Vol. 2, 2002):55-62.

<sup>19</sup> Paul Tripp, *Age of Opportunity* (Phillipsburg: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1997), pp. 144-5.

first two verses of 2 Timothy: 'But mark this: There will be terrible times in the last days. People will be lovers of themselves, lovers of money, boastful, proud, abusive, disobedient to their parents, ungrateful, unholy.' And a long list of evil things follows in the next four verses. The beginning of that list is 'lovers of themselves'.

I heard about a Christian lady who keeps bottles of supplementary health food on the table in her house, making it look like a pharmacy. Whenever she takes out something from the refrigerator for her guests, she explains that it is an organic food, or a well-being so and so. When she eats out with a group, the group has to take a long drive to eat what she wants. After they eat, they have to go to a place where herb tea can be served. If anyone takes coffee, she puts some bamboo salt in it, without asking the person, to get rid of caffeine. You can say she is obsessed by well-being. It may be true, but what is really dominating her heart is 'self-love' behind the well-being.

### Fear of Man in Relation with Well-being Syndrome

Some well-being people spend so much money that they get into financial difficulties. They do this not only for their good health but also for what other people would think of them. That is fear of man.

Modern people are very much concerned about self-esteem. Most of the self-esteem books say that the two best ways to raise your self-esteem are: first, achieve some successes which are then compared to what others do. Second, surround yourself with people who affirm you. As a result, you will be

dependent upon others' opinion.<sup>20</sup> In Korea, *chemyun* culture intensifies this problem. Nevertheless, no matter whether it is an eastern or western context, the human problem is the same, that is, the sinful heart.

Fear of man has to do with fear of God. We live in a pluralistic culture which says, 'You do your thing and I do mine.' Even in regard to God, people say, 'You have your version of God, and I have my version of God.' Thus, to say that your version of God is superior to anyone else's is an immoral act in this culture. When they talk about God, many people use the expression, 'God as we understand him'. Certainly, this is not the God in the Scriptures, where we read, 'For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures' (1 Cor. 15:3-4). As fear of God is eroded, the fear of man is intensified in the heart of human being.<sup>21</sup> A question has to be raised for well-being people, 'Which is your biggest concern—what people think about you, or what God thinks about you?'

## IV. Conclusion

In 20th century, capitalistic society has changed from a labour-production oriented life style to the leisure-consumption oriented life style. As a

20 Edward Welch, *When People Are Big and God Is Small* (Phillipsburg: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1997), p. 74.

21 Welch, *When People Are Big*, pp. 78-9.

result, the well-being syndrome appeared in the beginning of 21st century. The meaning of well-being is to pursue better life and enjoy it.

As we face the culture around us, we must be equipped with a Christian world view which includes a Christian perspective on the world, and the content of what Christians understand about the world. Therefore, a fundamental issue here is how a Christian exists and what he thinks.<sup>22</sup>

What then is well-being for Christians? Health is important and peace of mind is more important. But the most important thing of all is 'spiritual well-being' in relation with God, because the human being is a spiritual being created by God. That is why the apos-

tle Paul said to Timothy, 'Have nothing to do with godless myths and old wives' tales; rather, train yourself to be godly. For physical training is of some value, but godliness has value for all things, holding promise for both the present life and the life to come' (1 Tim. 4:7-8).

Well-being people seek not only physical health but also quality of life and peace of mind. But how can you get them? To plug into the machine to get pre-programmed experiences of happiness will not work. Welfarism tries to make sense of life in dependence on human virtue, but it is not dependable because the human being is totally corrupted. What then is the solution? The Bible answers, 'Since, then, you have been raised with Christ, set your hearts on things above, where Christ is seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things' (Col. 3:1-2).

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<sup>22</sup> Seung Goo Lee, *What is Christian World View?* (Seoul: SFC, 2003), p. 16.

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**Kiwoong Son** completed his doctorate at London School of Theology and served as a chaplain to Korean and Asian students at Royal Holloway College, University of London, UK, before returning to South Korea.

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