Understanding Korean Christianity

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I. Christianity in the North

A. (North) Korean Christian Federation was organized on November 28, 1946 in Pyeongyang.

B. There were more than 2000 Catholic and Protestant churches, and 300,000-350,000 Christians in the northern Korea right after the 1945-Liberation.

C. On June 25, 1950, war broke out between North Korea and South Korea. When the U. N. forces occupied North Korea, many North Korean Christians welcomed the South Korean and U. N. forces and participated in the anti-communistic activities.

D. Due to the pro-American stance of the Christian churches the Communist regime of North Korea regarded Christianity as an anti-patriotic religion. Because of this belief, the North Korean regime intensified its anti-religious campaigns in the post-bellum period.

E. The year 1988 was a turning point for the history of Christianity in North Korea. Two churches were built, one Catholic, the other Protestant. Two kinds of interpretation emerged to account for this unexpected development: real church or fake church?

F. Two major changes have been occurring in the church in North Korea since 1990s: church’s activity from the political area to the economic one, the emergence of underground church.

G. North Korean Christianity has been influenced by the philosophical principle of Juche philosophy, i.e., human beings have a central role in changes of the world and in opening their own way.

II. Christianity in the South

A. Since the introduction of Roman Catholicism in 1784 and Protestantism in 1884, Christianity has become Korea’s largest religion.

B. As of the year 2003, 66.4% of the Protestant Christians attended church every Sunday and 46.5% of the Protestant Christians gives tithes to the church.
Religious population in the South

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Religions</th>
<th>1995</th>
<th>2005</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Buddhist</td>
<td>10321 (23.2)</td>
<td>10726 (22.8)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Protestant</td>
<td><strong>8760 (19.7)</strong></td>
<td><strong>8616 (18.3)</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Catholic</td>
<td>2951 (6.6)</td>
<td>5146 (10.9)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Confucian</td>
<td>211 (0.5)</td>
<td>105 (0.2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Won Buddhist</td>
<td>87 (0.2)</td>
<td>130 (0.3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other religion</td>
<td>268 (0.6)</td>
<td>247 (0.5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No religious affiliation</td>
<td>21953 (49.3)</td>
<td>21865 (46.9)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: National Census

III. Protestant Beginnings and Church Growth

A. The majority of churches existing in Korea today are Presbyterian and Methodist. 1500 missionaries (including wives) came to Korea before World War II. American missionaries 70%, Great Britain 13%, Canada 6.4%. By denomination, Presbyterian 45.4%, Methodist 28.3%.

B. Korean great revival occurred in Wonsan in 1903 and climaxed in Pyongyang in 1907. It was one movement, characterized by intense realization of sin, repentance accompanied by public confession, and an inward peace and calm.

C. Mysticism swept Christian circles during the late 1920s and 1930s. Mystical groups were formed and they read Immanuel Swedenborg’s *Heaven and Hell* and Sunda Singh’s book. Sun Myung Moon of the Unification Church followed this line of the Christian faith.

D. After 1935, the church faced a serious problem with the demand by Japan for it to worship Shintoism.

E. The Presbyterian Church experienced three periods of schisms in the 1950s alone. Schism between Tong-hap and Hap-dong General Assemblies began 1959 because of the WCC Affiliation. Conservative Christians in Korea were constantly influenced by Carl McIntire.

The Numerical Change of South Korean Christians, 1950~2005

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Denomination</th>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Contents</th>
<th>Main Issue</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Presbyterian</td>
<td>1952</td>
<td>Go-Sin's Separation</td>
<td>Shinto Shrine Worship</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1953</td>
<td>Schism between PCR and PROK</td>
<td>Theological Line</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Korean Church Growth and Development

### F. Schism between Tong-hap and Hap-dong

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Event</th>
<th>WCC Affiliation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1959</td>
<td>Schism between Tong-hap and Hap-dong</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1961</td>
<td>Schism between Holiness and Jesus Holiness</td>
<td>Joining and Leaving WCC, NAE, ICCC</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The rate of the increase of churches by ten-year unit was 157% between 1960 and 1970, 65% between 1970 and 1980, and about 69% between 1980 and 1990. During the entire thirty years between 1950 (number of churches 5,011) and 1990 (35,819), the number of churches in Korea increased seven times. The vitality and self-confidence of the rapidly grown churches reached the climax around 1984, when the Korean churches commemorated one centennial anniversary of mission work.

### G. Joining and Leaving WCC, NAE, ICCC

The growth of Korean churches led to the rapid increase of dispatching missionaries abroad. The overseas mission work began to be active in the 1980’s. As of 1996, the areas where the largest number of missionaries advanced were Asia (49.3%), Central Asia and Caucasus (13.1%), Latin America (9.8%), Africa (7.9%), Europe (7%) and the Middle East (6.1%). Twenty thousand missionaries are now doing mission works in all parts of the world.

### IV. Responses to Korean Society

#### A. On March 1, 1919, a nationwide independent movement was formed against the Japanese colonial government. Sixteen of the thirty-three signers of the "Declaration of Independence" were Christian leaders. Christian groups organized 25-38% of the rallies and demonstrations across the country. At that time Christians was composed 1.5% of the population of Korea.

#### B. Since gaining independence from Japan in 1945, churches again suffered, this time because of the Korean War from 1950-1953. Many hundreds of thousands took refuge in the churches which gave the message of comfort. This type of Christianity is represented by the Full Gospel Church in Seoul.

#### C. Christianity in Korea has been identified with democratic development. Park Chung Hee took control of South Korea through military rule, which began in 1961. The church, particularly its dissident wing, maintained its active opposition to Park, who was assassinated in 1979, and his subsequent successors. Many more churches, however, had a close relationship with the Park Chung Hee regime on the basis of Chapter 13, Romans. While many Christian leaders were maintaining a close relationship with the Park Chung Hee regime, the democratization movement of the progressive churches was supported by the WCC and its member churches. The struggle produced a new Korean-style theology called minjung theology.

#### D. Minjung theology grew out of the socio-political situation of Korean society in the middle of 1970s. Minjung is a Korean word for people or mass, refers specifically to the oppressed, to the poor, or to the marginalized. Minjung theology holds that the history of the Korean
people is a history of the oppression and frustration. Minjung theologians read and interpret the Bible, church history, and Korean history with the eyes of the poor and the oppressed, thereby finding minjung as the subject of the history and as messiah.

E. Since the division of this peninsula, the Korean churches frequently declared their concern about national reunification in the form of prayer meetings, public statements or mass movements. The greatest change to the churches consisted in that they recognized reunification as the task of mission work in the 1980s. The National Council of Churches in Korea and its member churches announced “the Declaration of Korean Churches for the National Reunification and Peace” in February 1988. This Declaration confessed that the hatred and hostility harbored against North Korea was a sort of sin.

F. It was in 1986 that the delegates of the NCCK first began the dialogue of reunification with the delegates of the Korean Christian Federation in Glion, Switzerland through the World Council of Churches. Prior to this, in November, 1981, the Overseas Christian Association for National Reunification, composed of the Koreans residing in North America and Europe, had a reunification dialogue in Vienna, Austria with the Korean Christian Federation. World Council of Churches proposed a Tozanso meeting, Japan in October, 1984. At this meeting the delegates of South Korean churches agreed to the proposal, saying “the World Council of Churches provides an opportunity for the Christians of North and South Korea to meet through dialogues as soon as possible.”

V. The study of the history of Christianity in Korea

A. L. George Paik’s *The History of Protestant Missions in Korea*(1927) was the first doctoral dissertation by an Asian student on the origin and growth of the Protestant mission movements in Asia, addressed mainly missionaries and missions.

B. Theological study Institute related to the history of Christianity was held from July 29, 1963 through September 4, 1963 in Singapore. Thirty historians of Christianity from various Asian theological seminaries attended the Institute. Bishop Stephen Neil in his lecture pointed to the following problems for church history studies in the younger churches: a general lack of a historical consciousness, a dominating Western orientation in church history, and too little literature for scholarship. The historians of Asian Christianity who participated in the seminar strongly felt the need for a textbook on general church history written from an Asian perspective. Such a textbook would emphasize the growth of Asian churches rather than the expansion of Western churches. At this meeting, the historians of Asian Christianity felt the need to document Asian church history rather than foreign mission history.

C. The study of the history of Christianity with the Indian Christians as the subject of the history has already begun in the 1950s. KajBaago, a Danish missionary in India, paid attention to Indians and their efforts to build an Indian church. The Church History Association of India planned to write a six-volume *History of Christianity in India* in 1973 from a new perspective: “The history of Christianity is viewed as an integral part of the socio-cultural history of the Indian people rather than as separated from it. The history will therefore focus attention upon the Christian people in India.” The work by the Church History Association of India is still on its way.
D. In Korea, the matter of a paradigm shift in the writing of the history of Christianity was raised by Prof. Min Gyeong-Bae in the late 1960s. In his book A History of Christian Churches in Korea (1972), he insisted that L. George Paik’s The History of Protestant Missions in Korea (1927) did not address the national (minjok) church history. He intended the treatment of the Church of Korea to become the subject.

D. With the exception of India, Korea is the only country that has published the history of Christianity of its own country through a joint effort of Korean historians. The historians of Korean Protestant Christianity established the Institute of the History of Christianity in Korea in 1982 and have cooperatively studied the history of Korean Christianity.

E. Until recently, foreign scholars or missionaries from North America and Europe wrote the histories of Christianity instead of Asian historians. Now is the time for Asian historians to take responsibility for writing the history of Asian Christianity as well as the history of Christianity in their own countries. I would like to see Asian historians get together and discuss the history of Asian Christianity in Seoul, Chiang Mai, or Bangalore in the near future. At such a meeting, we could discuss the Asian perspectives on the basis of shared experiences of Asian churches and talk about the documentation and preservation of the historical materials of the Asian churches. After we have successfully worked through these preparatory stages, a book on the history of Asian Christianity, of which we are all in need, will ultimately be able to come into being.