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Item Type	Book chapter
Authors	Chung, Meehyun
Publisher	Globethics.net
Rights	Creative Commons Copyright (CC 2.5)
Download date	2026-04-14 09:05:51
Link to Item	http://hdl.handle.net/20.500.12424/173797

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CALVINISM IN KOREA WITHOUT CALVIN? A WOMEN'S PERSPECTIVE

Meehyun Chung, South Korea

Korea is frequently called the "land of the morning calm". But actually Korea in history was never a "land of the morning calm". If we look at the map of Korea, we will quickly understand how geographical location determined its fate. Korea was surrounded by greater powers: China, the USSR and Japan. Thus this small country often became a victim in the struggle for supremacy. At the same time, it was also a bridge over which the culture of China found its way to Japan. Up to 1882, the USA, Great Britain, Germany, Russia and France pushed Korea to open up the country and allow them to carry on trade unhindered.

1. Protestant Mission Churches in Korea

Towards the end of the 19th century, the Protestant church in Korea – which for the most part is Presbyterian – was established from the USA, even if the first Korean church was created by a Korean who himself had received the Gospel in China. Korean Christians are indeed proud of this fact. But the Presbyterian/Evangelical Reformed Church was first given its structure through American missionary ventures. The first Presby-

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terian missionary in the country was Horace Grant Underwood, who originated from Great Britain but had lived in the United States before arriving in Korea on April 5, 1885 together with his Methodist friend and missionary Henry G. Appenzeller, an American of Swiss heritage. Thus the Protestant church in Korea had a very strong character of "made in the USA". Following Catholic mission activity in the 18th century, large-scale unrestricted foreign Protestant operations began in 1885: first the Presbyterians and the Methodists, later Baptists, Anglicans etc. White Protestant missionaries arrived in the company of colonial power greedy for expansion and the forced trade of foreign capitalists. The way in which they allocated the mission areas was the main cause of the current division into many Protestant churches.

Korea already had a very long tradition of religions based on writings, such as Buddhism and Confucianism. Hence the Bible was quickly accepted when Christianity came into the country. Reading the Bible contributed substantially to the literacy of the population, above all of women. The Bible has great authority for Christians. With economic growth, the church landscape also changed to some degree. But the living relationship with God, even if linked with the fear of God as judge, remained.

While secularisation became a glaring problem in western society, people in Korea were living through Japanese colonial rule and the dreadful Korean war. Throughout these difficult times they never lost their religious zeal or gave up on the search for God. In the socially and politically hopeless situation of the 19th century the proclamation of the gospel offered new hope, namely, the kingdom of God. This meant a certain liberation from submission to the old social and cultural conventions. A clear change of life practice and life orientation could be strongly detected among Christians. Mission accelerated modernisation in Korea. Schools, hospitals, and the women's movements are some positive examples of innovations that came out of missionary activity.

The results of this missionary activity should be evaluated in a differentiated way.

The population of South Korea is now 18 percent Protestant, of which 69 percent are members of the Presbyterian Church. Another 11 percent are Catholic, while others are Buddhists, Taoists, Cheondoists, Confucians, or Shamanists. Although the roots of the Reformed Church of South Korea date back to Zwingli and Calvin, Martin Luther is much better known as a reformer than his counterparts Zwingli in Zurich and Calvin Geneva. While Calvin is less celebrated than Luther, he has had a great inner influence on the church with his doctrine of predestination, his understanding of being a Christian, and his ideas of the ministry and church structure. Unfortunately, his teachings were introduced to Korean Christianity in a one-sided, at times corrupted form by American styled churches. Unfortunately, so far as its theological impact is concerned, one cannot say much that is positive. By the churches "made in the USA" mentioned above, I mean a Christianity shaped by Puritanism and fundamentalism. Presbyterianism – which for Calvin actually stands in the theological mainstream – came to Korea twisted in many ways, from Switzerland via Scotland and the USA. Hence, the many new efforts to investigate the origins of the Swiss Reformation directly and deepen our knowledge of Calvin from the original texts and in the light of his historical context, instead of simply adopting American Calvinism. It remains our task to read Calvin correctly and interpret him better, as Karl Barth did in his time by renewing the doctrine of election, instead of repeating him uncritically.

In building its church, the Reformed Church in South Korea places strong emphasis on forms of piety including house fellowship groups, Bible groups, and early morning prayer. The Korean church is also strongly characterised by positive Calvinistic characteristics such as hard work, a disciplined life, and accepting one's profession as one's calling. The deep rifts within Korea's Reformed Church have been a chronic problem, resulting from the competitive nature of American

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missionary societies. A renewed focus on their common roots in Calvin's teaching could provide impetus toward healing these differences and divides.

2. Calvinism without Calvin

To correct a negative prejudice is more difficult than to present a completely new idea. Calvin and Calvinism have been seen in very conflicting ways. 1) Conservative theologians, who stand politically on the right, teach Calvin and Calvinism only in a dogmatic sense, without understanding their social context. But they reference Calvin very gladly as a foundation for theological conservatism. 2) Progressive theologians, politically and theologically radical, find Calvin's thought and methods so conservative that no one can draw anything new from them. 3) For theologians sympathetic to feminism, Calvin's theology is misogynist and completely out of date. For women theologians in general, Calvin is not a particularly sympathetic figure. They find that the authoritarian structure of his theology leaves no room for real human dignity or women's freedom.

Calvin's doctrine of double predestination has had disastrous effects in Korea. It was used, always as a dualistic model, with friend and enemy images, against ideological dissidents and people of other faiths. "Faith in Jesus leads to heaven, lack of faith in Jesus leads to hell." This motto has nothing to do with Calvin. Nevertheless, the mechanism of blessing and curse was understood as deriving from Calvin. It was preached very frequently by street evangelists and was also important in the churches. Start from the fear of hell, and one can never be released from the feeling of sin and the fear of punishment. This thought has, rather, promoted within Christianity the blind acceptance of an unjust social system, a blind anti-Communism, and a readiness to defame the

other. Structural sin was scarcely noticed, while wealth was easily glorified and poverty execrated.

Reliance on God does not have anything to do with subservience before great secular power. But through the wave of American mission, America placed itself at the centre of great power. Fear of God was linked to fear of the great power America. Likewise submission to God was tied to Christian subservience to America. Fundamentalist-oriented conservative Christians tend not to promote political self-awareness or self-confidence. Leaning on God in order to escape from one's own anxiety and problems is not separated from dependence on America. Thus economic and political independence from America was not promoted. Calvin's doctrine of double predestination has had serious repercussions in South Korea, as it has been misused to stamp people with other beliefs or ideological points of view as enemies. South Korean churches, instead of labelling their North Koreans brothers and sisters as an "axis of evil", should work more actively toward building bridges and offer them humanitarian assistance. Calvin should be rediscovered to overcome ideological dualism.

3. The unfinished liberation of women

Christianity on the one hand brought liberation for women living in Korean traditions and religions that were hostile towards them. But on the other hand another, new repression of women developed within Christianity and the Christian churches. If we look more closely at the consequences of the introduction of the Christianity, there are contrasts and contradictions: the emancipation of women was a positive consequence, but unfortunately this liberation remained incomplete.

Western patriarchy and a Puritanism shaped by Calvinism were thoroughly mixed with Korean patriarchy. This had a powerful impact on Christianity, anchoring a new patriarchal system within it. As the his-

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tory of the world church has shown, women played a tremendously important role in establishing the church in Korea. The devotion to church matters of the Korean Christian women, who were called "Bible women" or "evangelists", was more important for the extension of Christianity than the success of the Nevius method (self-propagation, self-support, self-government). They visited houses with special fervour, in order to proclaim the gospel in a completely simple way and introduce church songs as well as the story of the Bible.

These women contributed fervently to building up the church. But in comparison with the ministers they were socially not very highly regarded and got much less pay, although in real terms they worked much harder than the ministers did. Already at that time, women were not treated equally within the church. Once the churches were established, women were excluded from a leading role. They were only allowed to serve as volunteers – industrious, dutiful, well versed in the Bible, and generous – in welfare and social work.

Calvinism and Calvin's teachings on church offices were taken over literally, without attending to their historical or contextual background. The Confucian tradition, where one simply learns by heart the beliefs and the theories of the great teachers, also played a role in this. So Calvin's teachings were taken over simply, without critical analysis. If one understands by Calvinism the American Puritanism that was implanted in the country by fundamentalist US missionaries, then it integrates into the Confucian structure very well. To learn Holy Scripture by heart, to accept the Bible word by word, without analysing it from a text-critical or historical-critical point of view, fits into this religious culture. Ministers, elders, deacons: that is the hierarchy (without doctors) given by Calvin. This hierarchy led to the exclusion of women from the higher positions of leadership with decision-making power and their use only in sectors of service. And in this way was formed an extra office, inter-

posed between elder and deacon, for women who excelled in devoted, faithful work.

All these things have to do with an understanding of the omnipotence of God that frustrated an understanding of God in relationship. The minister has authority as the proclaimer of God's word. Thus the church became minister-centred, and in the congregations no grassroots democracy could develop. The risk of the human lust for glory is rather high. A minister who founds a church and is successful in numerical terms is highly honoured, even though Calvin, to shield himself against human admiration, wanted the location of his grave to be kept secret. Here we can learn from Calvin how he intended his church order: Calvinism should do without Calvin.

4. Calvin for economic justice and integrity of creation

If I may emphasise Calvin's significance for the churches and for Christianity today, I would like to mention above all Calvin's Christian social ethics and his stress on community inspired by the Holy Spirit. Thanks to the Calvinian ethics with its stress on "worldly asceticism" and the "work ethic", Protestants developed specific hard-working and efficient patterns of life. That has certainly contributed positively to economic growth. To that extent it confirms what Max Weber wrote in his thesis on Calvinism and capitalism. But unfortunately Calvin's other economic ethics (see Christoph Stückelberger's essay in this book), namely, recognising structural sin, a bias for the poor, strong solidarity with the socially weak (refugees, orphans, widows among others), as well as care for the common good, was never emphasised. Korean Christians still face the task of promoting inculturation, expanding the horizon of faith (a perspective that looks beyond an egoistic focus on salvation, self- and family-centredness) and developing Christian ethics in the society. In this process, it would help to look more precisely at

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Calvin's teachings and their social background and to interpret them in a more differentiated way.

Calvin's Christian social and economic ethics are of great importance both to the church and the society at large. One should be able to expect sustained protest from South Korean churches on matters such as the environmental damage caused by building golf courses, and their work to assist migrants done in solidarity with the weak. Calvin's heritage is an obligation to support economic justice and protect the integrity of creation.

5. Foundation for democratic Church structures

Calvin was of course not an infallible prophet. He was a man of his time. To expect from him a prescription valid for all time is absurd. Nonetheless there are many positive things that, with an understanding of the historical background at that time, one may also apply to today's problems. Even if a certain metaphorical problem exists, one may still emphasise certain things, such as his ecclesiology, in which Calvin understands the visible church as the mother of believers (*mater et magistra*): "But because it is now our intention to discuss the visible church, let us learn even from the simple title 'mother' how useful, indeed how necessary, it is that we should know her. For there is no other way to enter into life unless this mother conceive us in her womb, give us birth, nourish us at her breast, and lastly, unless she keep us under her care and guidance until, putting off mortal flesh, we become like the angels (Matt. 22:30). Our weakness does not allow us to be dismissed from her school until we have been pupils all our lives."¹ Western patriarchy and Calvinistic Puritanism have been strongly mixed with the traditional Korean patriarchy of Confucian origin. Particularly in the churches, one must learn to avoid discrimination by gender, race, or social class, and instead place as much esteem as possible on each individual. That is the essence of it. As

¹ Calvin, John, *Instit.*, IV, 1,4.

Calvin might have put it: Each of the organs of the Holy Spirit that form the body of Christ, is precious, as the Holy Spirit grants life to each part of the organism, without prejudice. With this vision, Calvin laid the foundations of a democratic church structure.

6. Dialogue of strengths and weaknesses

If we transfer and apply this concept to our own century, we may also learn from one another in the worldwide church and observe afresh our own weaknesses and strengths, even if different forms and standards can never be compared one to one or simply taken over. An example: The exchange programme between Korean and Swiss churches, which dates from the signing of the agreement (covenant) between the Federation of Swiss Protestant Churches and two Presbyterian churches in South Korea (PCK and PROK), serves precisely for this purpose. The programme was prompted by a request from the Korean side to get to know the origins of the Reformation, since the Korean Presbyterian churches came into being via a detour through the USA. Conversely, something of the dynamic of the young churches abroad should flow back into Switzerland and Europe. An important goal of the exchange is to appreciate how the gospel is lived in other cultures. This programme can still contribute much to mutual enrichment, so that time and again we can become the church in our place and the worldwide church of Jesus Christ.

Too great a focus on one's own confession can lead to divisions in society. Such divisions among Protestants are now being exported throughout the world as the result of a missionary policy that replicates the errors of the European and American missions of the 19th century. It is more important than ever before that we work toward coalitions and cooperative efforts to overcome conflicts of spirituality and theology. Switzerland is the birthplace of Reformed churches, while the global presence and influence of the

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movement is much stronger than is generally known in Switzerland. It remains an excellent idea for Switzerland's Reformed churches to maintain a theological dialogue with the newer churches of the world as a means of discovering each other's strengths and weaknesses. Instead of being viewed in a negative light or as mere history, this tradition could then be revived creatively to meet the needs of each situation.