

# HISTORY AND BEYOND: THE ROLE OF THE KOREAN PROTESTANT CHURCH IN CULTURAL ENGAGEMENT

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## **Introduction**

Korea has a deep and complex history often shaped by major socio-economic and political factors. Historically, the Korean Protestant church has been an elemental factor in the transforming and shaping the predominantly Confucian Korean society. During the Japanese occupation in 1930s and 1940s, the Protestant Church responded to the emergence of calls for political reforms through anti-Japanese nationalism movements, opposing the social injustices by the Japanese colonialists. Connected to this was another strategy - a non-political approach - that churches used in mission fields that culminated in the 1907 great revival in the Korean Peninsula (Cho, n.d.).

Following the end of Japanese colonial rule, the Korean church underwent a fundamental transformation consistent with the visions of influential missionaries and their evangelization strategies. As Korean society embraced modernization, the church offered an entry point for foreign missionaries and hence foreign perspectives, particularly the American culture. The church also established numerous schools and colleges as well as medical stations across the country (Kim, n.d.). The Korean War (1950-1953) presented another context in which the Protestant church came out against communist ideology and in support of a pro-democratic stance, encouraged by America and her allies (Kim, 2004). As time went by, the western view began seeping through to the structures of the Korean Confucian society, aided by rapid technological and socio-economic change in an increasingly globalised environment.

Today, Korean society is undergoing speedy change. Shaped by the emphasis of economic growth during the dictatorship of the 60s and 70s, and later materialism, what came to be termed as the 'mega-church syndrome' engulfed the church's perspective of growth (Cho, n.d.).

The contemporary Korean Protestant Church, therefore, finds itself under the pressures

of the prevailing perspectives of postmodernity and globalization and the pressure to swim along in their heavy currents. In recent decades, after attaining independence and particularly after the economic breakthrough of the late 90s, the church's involvement in transforming Korean culture has been minimal. The church has tended to concentrate on theoretical theology at the pulpit and missionary-sending successes but lacking a fundamental commitment to cultural engagement and the transformation of Korean society. A western, post-Enlightenment, dualistic view of Christianity inherited by the early Korean Christians has greatly impacted the teachings in the Protestant churches here. Despite some activism, this pietistic mentality, with its "other-world" focus, has largely crippled the 21st century Korean church from being a strong influence for good. God's call through Jeremiah to "seek the welfare of the city in which you live" (Jeremiah 29:7) has mainly been lost, while at the same time many individual congregations have sought autonomously to enlarge their own spiritual empires.

There are great challenges facing the Korean church in several respects. Active engagement of the church in forming and re-shaping cultures is urgent, as postmodern forces offer many competing worldviews - all of which lead to cultural idolatry. The church needs to reflect and critique of its response to contemporary competing worldviews in doctrine, education, politics, environment, information technology, music and entertainment. Such a reflection ought to be based on a Biblical perspective if the church is to remain faithful to its calling. The Cultural mandate cannot be separated from the church's vision and mission. All cultures, including Korea, are fallen as a result of sin. They are in dire need of shalom-building initiatives from national Christians who will seek to subject everything to the Lordship of Christ.

This paper briefly examines the role of Korean Protestant Church in the development of Korea and outlines some of the challenges faced by the church in its call to engage cultures for Jesus Christ.

### **Historical and Developmental Contribution of the Korean Church**

The role of the Korean churches in the struggle for liberation from the hands of Japanese colonialists was significant for what Korea became after independence. Many churches spoke out against injustices through labor movement and civil struggle amid oppression by the military regimes. Amid limited options, the churches became the hub of the struggle for democracy and human rights countering the oppression of the by the subsequent military governments (Cho, n.d.). Not all churches chose the path of struggle. As Yoon

(2005) observes, some groups supported the colonial government either out of fear of persecution or not seeing the importance of the struggle altogether. Nevertheless, and despite later impotence within Korea, the church's contribution particularly in the struggle for political freedom was significant.

Looking back at the historical development, South Korea has embraced democracy, justice and human rights to a stronger degree (though from a western perspective) than North Korea. These developments never came easily, but with great effort and bloodshed such as the June Democratic Struggle of 1987 in which millions of workers went on strike and employed militant tactics to win significant gains in pay and conditions. They also agitated for political reform (Aspen, 2008).

Pro-democracy protests emerging from Kwangju in 1987 not only involved student protesters. Doerner, Chavira, Washington and Hwang (1987) observe that religious groups manifestly participated in the struggle. In their article published in the Time Magazine, they write:

Nor were students the only South Koreans involved in what amounts to a deepening confrontation with Chun's rule. A congregation of about 1,200, including 800 Protestant and Roman Catholic clergymen, took part in an overnight prayer vigil for political reform at the Ahyun Methodist Church in downtown Seoul. About 40 participants had their heads shaved by amateur barbers as a sign of their determination to carry on the protest campaign. An estimated 750 riot police surrounded the church to prevent additional people from entering. Eventually, the police broke up the meeting with force, injuring 27 participants (Doerner & et' al, 1987, para. 4).

Sung (2008) summarizes the nature of the Korean Church's growth pointing out five achievements since the advent of the first missionaries. These achievements include tremendous growth in a short span; growth of enthusiast Bible-believing Christians with passion for evangelism; providing the nation with spiritual and moral substance in times of crises like colonization and the Korean War; producing many young intellectual men and women, pastors and leaders; and the church sending out thousands of missionaries across the globe.

The church's involvement in education was significant. Christian missionaries founded about 800 schools of various grades, accommodating over 41,000 students, about twice the total enrollment in all Korean government schools at the time (Kim, n.d.). Grayson (1985) notes that, "Christians took a lead in the establishment of these schools which became the first link in the chain which bound together Korean nationalism and the new religion."

More so, the church established medical colleges and introduced western medicine (Kim, n.d)

### **The Complex Issue of Korea's Separation**

The division of the Korean peninsula remains a key watershed in modern Korean history. the consequences of which still define the economic, political and security realities across East Asia. Being technically at war for over five decades now, the two Koreas have entered into adversarial competition in military might with the North pursuing nuclear militarism and the South engaging foreign military and allies. The recent Cheonan naval ship tragedy, recognized by an international committee as having been caused by aggressive actions by the north, has only helped to heighten tension in the region.

Kil-Soo Yoon (n.d.) argues that today's North Korean nuclear power carries one of the most serious threats to peace on the Korean peninsula with the United States of America strong commitment to the south being a significant factor in the issue. The relationship between China and North Korea has also been in focus whenever the international community discuss North Korea's actions threats and. The church, according to Yoon (n.d.) must therefore relentlessly keep working for peace, reconciliation and co-existence. The church needs to advocate ongoing humanitarian support for North Koreans and encourage the North Korean churches even when abuses and manipulations of such support may counter the effort.

A meeting in Mt. Gungang in North Korea where Christians from the two Koreas gathered and held a prayer meeting and choir festival together, is an example of engaging the Christians from the North. Such meetings offer opportunities for Christians to share their struggles, blessings and to encourage one another.

Two hundred ordained and lay Christians participated from the South, representing member churches of the National Council of Churches in Korea (NCCCK), and twelve Christians from the North represented the Korea Christians Federation. This prayer gathering was a highly significant, historical event in that it was the first joint effort of North and South Korean Christians for a gathering of lay people as well as ministers, and the first such event held on the Korean peninsula. In the past North and South Koreans could meet only in a third country. The main events of the prayer gathering were worship services and a special choir festival. We believe the prayer gathering will give strong momentum to opening up a new history of Korean Christianity leading to peaceful

reunification (Yoon, 2005, n.d. para. 19).

Although the separation of the Koreas continually intensifies political, economic, and social differences, some Christians have tried to be part of reconciliation efforts. The existence of mutual trust may be at its lowest currently following the North's continuous threat and pursuit of nuclear weaponry by the North and lately by the sinking of Cheonan naval ship. Perhaps this provides the churches with an opportunity to foster new diplomatic strategies to engage North Korea at a difficult time when the two countries have severed economic ties and communication channels with each other. (Na, 2010).

### **Engaging the Cultures**

According to Tylor (1958), the term "culture" is used to denote the totality of the humanly created world, from material culture and cultivated landscapes, via social institutions (political,religious,economicetc),to acknowledge and meaning. Further,"culture, or civilization, taken in its broad, ethnographic sense, is that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society."(Tylor, p.1)

In an ecological and anthropological sense, there is a tendency to illustrate culture as a "tool" used by a society to maintain its adjustment to nature. Rappaport (1980) claims that this tool comprises not only concrete physical tools, but also knowledge, skills and forms of organization. He offers a classical definition of culture as "a part of the distinctive means by which a local population maintains itself in an ecosystem and by which a regional population maintains and coordinates its groups and distributes them over the available land."(Rappaport, 1980, p.233).

Cultural engagement should not be spurned as if it implies a thoughtless syncretism between the church and culture. Thorn (2008) suggests that engaging cultures comes in a three-fold manner: 1) rejecting what is evil; 2) taking up what is good; and 3) redeeming what is broken or lost. It involves the deliberate critique of prevailing worldview perspectives based on the authentic perspective - the Biblical worldview.

### **Why Engage Cultures?**

Christians must make and engage cultures because that is God's commandment back in Genesis chapter 1. God commanded man to subdue the earth and be fruitful - that is, to form culture in a faithful manner to God's revelation of himself. The Christian cultural

mandate is clear from the Biblical point of view and consistent throughout the Biblical story. Since culture is not limited to traditions of an ethnic community or language, modern day lifestyles are composed of many cultures and sub-cultures. The contemporary cultures may include: mass media culture; IT culture; scholarship culture; political culture; economic culture and so on.

By acknowledging that these cultures have been impacted by the fall or sin, Christians are to interact with them in shalom-building ways that reflect their faithfulness to the Scripture. Edgar (n.d.) argues that one of Apostle Paul's lessons was how culture can be redeemed: That it is never enough simply to decry the evils of the world, and then to offer salvation either as a way of warring against culture or as an escape from the world. In his Mars Hill speech recorded in Acts 17, Paul reminds his listeners of the original purpose of history. God is the maker of the world and everything in it. He has made humankind as a God-seeking creation, designed to worship Him and enjoy Him forever, as the Shorter Catechism reminds us.

Cultural engagement is also undertaken with a clear mind that culture is not evil in itself. It has been impacted by the fall and hence in need of redemption. Redemptive cultural engagement (or applying the gospel to everyday life) means seeing and being in the world (Edlin, 2009) from the Biblical perspective which brings everything under the lordship of Jesus Christ. Edgar (n.d.) further claims that redemptive engagement happens through redirecting or redefining cultural patterns affected by the fall, such as Paul's interaction with the Greek philosophy.

For the Korean church today, and indeed for all Christians living in the present time, redemptive cultural engagement means critiquing the contemporary worldview perspectives in the light of the scripture. Christians in Korea may challenge the dominating economic rationalism perspectives in education, politics, media, relationship and sexuality, mission work and so on. Such engagement could be applicable in two ways (Edger, n.d.): external and internal redemptive engagements. The external redeems the visible culture; while the internal redeems the invisible relationship with culture.

Crouch (2009) advocates not only the redemption of existing cultures, but also the making of culture—good culture for an infinitely good Creator. Crouch also cautions against many Christians' habit of projecting a negative attitude toward the fallen cultures of the day and damning them to condemnation as some dualists often do. He suggests the use of the term as “credemption” –creating and redeeming cultures.

Instead of simply condemning, critiquing, consuming, and copying culture, the way forward is to create a good alternative. Otherwise, we are simply left at square one, with very little Christian progress in various cultures. So, instead of bemoaning bad movies, make better ones. Instead of copying contemporary music and inserting Christian lyrics, create new music and contribute to cultural change through innovation and creativity. Draw attention to your Creator through superior or innovative cultural action. (Dobson, n.d., para.2)

### **Cultural Engagement and the Korean Church**

To examine the role of Korean church in cultural engagement, there is need to analyze the reality of the Korean society from a history-cultural perspective. Coming to terms with the prevailing worldview perspectives is vital. Korean Confucianism which has had a cultural purpose of enhancing stability and maintaining a harmonious society is today confronted with a new world order which embraces and expects change. In fact, economic growth, fashion in clothing and IT devices, and planned obsolescence rely upon an embrace of change and diversity which Confucianism was never designed to cope with.

The disconnect between a Confucian perspective and the multiplicity of new postmodern views in an increasingly internationalized Korea serves to increase the tension. Maintain and strengthen tradition and the establishment says Confucianism. No. Out with the old and in with a constantly changing fad-driven individualism is the cry of young Korea.. While Confucianism is a lifestyle that emphasizes awareness of the community as being more important than an individual, globalization is a mega-trend in which the boundaries of a nation-state no longer provide a significant barrier to the free flow of information, technology, industrial goods, capital assets and culture. Globalization is a wave whose direct and indirect forces influence everyone, and in which multilateral relationships between nations and their increasing networking become more dominant than ever (Lewis and Sesay, 2002).

The Korean emphasis on economic productivity is one sign of a nation embracing a prevailing global perspective. Korea will host the G-20 Summit this year and economic engagements from a globalized perspective can already be seen in the agenda laid out so far.

Technological advancement in Korea is speeding up this development as more young Koreans have turned to the West, and to America in particular, for their values and patterns of life. This is evident in music, dressing and eating habits and even the

perception of religion. Individualism, an obvious characteristic of Western thought, is setting in as the population joins the acquisition treadmill by consumerism - a consequence of economic rationalism. Conspicuous consumption (after all, Korea is now the home of the largest department store in the world) is the desired lifestyle. Particularly for young people, it is replacing Confucianism and the Christian church as the source of fulfillment and hope. The role of mass media in indoctrinating these Western worldviews and globalization has been significant (Kamary, 2009).

Having inherited the Christian heritage from the West, a culture impacted by dualistic view of reality, Korean churches seem to have embraced the same view and seems largely impotent at addressing many of these pressing, contemporary idolatries. Noting the stagnation in growth regarding the Korean church, and an unfortunate decline, Sung (2008) comments that non-biblical elements are responsible for the decline and one of such elements is dualism. Some of hymnals written by early Christian missionaries and widely sung in most of the Korean churches reflect dualistic view of reality.

Furthermore, there have been concerns about how the Korean church has responded to, or interacted with dominant worldview perspectives of shamanism, Confucianism, Buddhism, and Taoism. Lately, the new cultures of economic rationalism, commodification, materialism and consumerism embraced by the majority of the Korean populace have turned a section of the church into materialistic institutions of “hybrid spirituality” (Sung, 2008), with the church seeming to be bemused by these contemporary cultural forces that it largely fails to address. The situation is made all the more tragic in the light of the fact that it is only the salvation message of Jesus Christ, the powerful relationship with Him, and the dynamic, inter-relational purpose for living that comes from Him, which provide the only lasting solution to the current societal malaise!

### **Dealing with the Contemporary Worldviews**

The prevailing worldview characteristics in the Korean society including in the church are very evident in the mindsets of dualism and in economic rationalism.

#### **i. Dualism**

Dualism is an approach to life which suggests that there are two ways of seeing and being in the world; sacred (ideal) and secular (natural) and that each is confined to its own sector of reality. While such duality between the natural and ideal world leads to difficulties in conviction, the visible world has paved way to scientific discoveries,



acknowledged scientific laws and shaped cultures (Henderson and Fox, 2008). Plato is regarded as the father of modern dualism and was the centre of Greek thought (Edlin, 2009). In his thought, Plato emphasized the “spiritual world” over the secular one. This school of thought impacted the philosophical, theological and the artistic notion over the years with Plato’s idea that the physical world was not really “real”, and that what mattered was the next and ideal world, and the means of accessing it (Henderson and Fox, 2008).

Dualism and its myth of neutrality have caused many people to think that they are free of philosophical assumptions (Bartholomew, 2008), and falling into the fallacy that, “things are just the way they are,” and that things are done in a natural way without any deliberate influence or effort (Edlin, 2009). Kanitz (2005) observed that in our thoughts, we always start with a “densely populated intellectual ground with various worldviews firmly entrenched and others competing for space” (p. 105). There is no neutrality in all of life despite a pervasive myth of neutrality particularly in postmodern times. Edlin (2009) noted that the principle rationale behind the myth of neutrality lies in the dualistic view that many people hold, owing to their cultural orientation and perhaps how they are reluctant to think deeply about things.

Though Western dualism often takes the form of a distinction between mind and body or body and soul, the Eastern dualism distinguishes between Li (reason) and Chi (emotion) and has had pervasive effect in Eastern thought than an form of monism (Sung, 2008).

An example of dualism impact in Korean churches is the making of value judgments on occupations and talents (Sung, 2008). Some churches have focused primarily on spreading the gospel and making converts instead of going a step further in making disciples. Becoming a pastor, being a missionary or working in a church have been elevated to mean a greater vocation compared to other occupations.

## **ii. Economic Rationalism**

On the other hand, economic rationalism, the belief that if something is good for the economy (profit) it is indisputably good. This form of idolatry is supported by globalization and has greatly impacting the meaning of what it means to be successful in education, relationships and marriage, politics and in business (Kamary, 2009).

In Korea for instance, success in education for most young people is to enter one of the top-notch universities like Seoul National, Korea National University and Yonsei National

University commonly abbreviated as SKY. This situation has pushed parents into a fierce competition in taking their children to Hagwons (academies or cram schools). This cut-throat competition especially for the college entrance - oriented race has been criticized as crippling school education (SahDong-seok,2009). Parents are spending a large portion of their income in sending their children to cram schools and hiring private tutors for them in preparation for college entrance exams. "Education experts often liken private education to an arms race — parents engage in an never - ending competition to let their children get ahead of others, staking all resources, and this vicious cycle goes on."(KangHyun-kyung,2009). Academic and social success has been defined on the basis of the university one enroll in. Big companies have sought to employ the alumni of top universities seeing them as quality cogs to their profit - making engines.

On how the contemporary generation view success in relationships, courtship and marriages, the effect of economic rationalism is evident. Here, mass media and high-speed internet connectivity in Korea has advanced the view that an ideal relationship or marriage means a wealthy couple with a highly-paying job, latest car models and a mansion for a house. Borrowing heavily from the west's and mass media's definitions of beauty, romance, courtship and marriage have led many to become disillusioned with traditional Korean values. While the standard of beauty differs from culture to culture, Korean society has heavily adopted a western view of beauty, especially for women. The pursuit of these features on beauty has turned Korea into a market flooded with skin-lightening cosmetic products, slim medications and diet foods. As a result, there have been a rising number of cosmetic surgeries performed each year for example changing eyelid appearance to be more western.

There are many instances of the commodification of relationships especially among Korean celebrities (Actors and Actress) dominate the television programs and thus are key agents who shape perceptions. Young people have found role models in them with the majority of them mislead into thinking that money, fashion and fame equal success and happiness. In politics, influential wealthy people with established social status are thought to represent success. Also, in business, profit making has become primary goal overshadowing ethics, justice, social service, and environmental concerns.

### **The Church and the Christian Worldview in Cultural Engagement**

A worldview is a way of seeing and being in the world (Edlin, 2009), a way of describing how an individual or a society views the context it finds itself in. Kraft (2008) defines worldview as "the totality of the culturally structured images and

assumptions (including value and commitment or allegiance assumptions) in terms of which a people both perceive and respond to reality" (p. 12). In defining worldview, Francis Schaefer used the term integration point; Neil Postman (1995) used the term "god" while postmodernists often use the term metanarrative (or the lack of it). Everyone has a worldview. Goheen and Bartholomew (2008) assert that every person has a way of analyzing the world around them and to claim to be free of any philosophical assumptions is simply to be unaware of them.

A Christian worldview perspective or scripturally informed worldview begins from an acknowledgement that there is no neutrality in all of life because at the core of every worldview is religion or a faith commitment (Edlin, 1999). Therefore everyone has a worldview. Denying any philosophical assumption is simply to be unaware of it (Bartholomew, 2008), since a worldview is that which governs and conditions a person's perception of the world - his or her "properly basic beliefs" (Platinga, 2002) or control beliefs. Smith (2009) asserts that even, "before we are thinkers, we are believers; before we can offer our rational explanations of the world; we have already assumed a whole constellation of beliefs..." (p.43). It is more a matter of the imagination than intellect, a means of feeling our way around the world. Though various terms have been used to describe worldview with its core belief foundations, Christians have a unique perspective that begins from God the Creator of the universe and everything therein and the only God who fulfills human heart. Christian worldview is therefore a way of seeing and being in the world (Edlin, 2009), subjecting every thought and act in obedience to God with deliberate identity and commitment to the Lordship of Jesus Christ by faith.

The Korean church finds itself in a pluralistic postmodern society yet it must strive from a biblically faithful perspective to remain relevant to today's generation. Postmodernism makes it even more a challenging task to work in a highly technological society where the presence competing worldview perspectives is near ubiquitous. In the wake of postmodernism where relativity of belief is a fundamental commitment, Christians must remember their duty to detect, critique, expose, and reject, lies of the postmodern views in the cultures that they inhabit (Kamary, 2009).

Christians pastors, other leading Christian commentators and Christian schools and universities must provide the lead. They, must stand out and act in faith and bring an awareness of untrue, misleading contemporary views competing worldviews of Confucianism, dualism, economic rationalism and materialism. The church and Christian schools and colleges must teach Christians how to evaluate and critique the nature of economic growth purported as the primary fulcrum for individual or societal success

at expense of human integrity as made in the image of God. The Church needs to openly teach congregations how to respond to the issues of economic rationalism and globalization in a faithful manner knowing that cultural engagement is part of practical theology.

From a Christian perspective, all cultures including IT, mass media, politics and education are disfigured by the impact of sin. These cultures and their competing worldviews are liturgical and are therefore not religiously neutral (Smith, 2009). They shape and inform the hearts of people. Therefore, education, politics, media and IT are not neutral and Christians must engage them in the light of Scripture.

Perhaps one way of responding to non-neutrality in education would be for the Korean churches to turn their magnificent mega-buildings into Christian learning institutors. If necessarily the rooms in churches could be converted into alternative hagwons where teaching from a Christian perspective can be undertaken by Christian teachers. From observation, many of these rooms in the big church buildings lay idle throughout the week only serving various groups of people on Sundays.

The Korean church can seek to redefine the Christian mass media institutions to engage cultures in which they serve and expose the falsehood and dangers of the contemporary life views masquerading as a message of fulfillment in dualism and wealth accumulation. Christians in Korea must be aware that there is no neutrality even in the media and the internet. These two are some of the most powerful tools that shape worldviews among the Korean young people. Mass media and internet educate and like any form of educational content, theirs constitute a “liturgy” - a fundamentally pedagogical conduit for forming of human heart and desires (Smith, 2009).

But the great task of the church does not stop at a critique and a deconstruction of these pagan, powerful cultural forces. The gospel message provides a deep and empowering message of hope and purposeful existence now and for eternity. After dethroning pagan, postmodern idolatries, the glorious task of the people of God, in every calling and profession, is to obey the cultural mandate, in the light of the cross, in a way that creates culture and shapes contemporary life in a glorious and joyful expression of love, shalom and hope. The gospel is not just about keeping a list of rules until we die and go to heaven. The promise of eternal life in Christ is real and true for the future. But it is also a dynamic and enduring driving force for the present, providing real and exciting direction and purpose in the here and now, based upon a joyful personal relationship with Christ and a realization that

Christians are called to be His witness in every aspect of culture in 21st century Korea and to the ends of the earth.

## **Conclusion**

The historical participation of the Korean church in the development of the Korean nation has been acknowledged. Even where some factions of the church, did not see the necessity to participate in the struggle for political reform and democratization, in past decades the Korean church in general has made a tremendously contribution to the development of Korean society.

The Korean Protestant church has engaged cultures in the past; however, today these engagements have declined degenerated into complacency particularly after the gaining of independence and the after economic miracle of the late twentieth century until today. The current situation of reluctance in cultural engagement at a time when Korean society is embracing new cultures in the era of postmodernism and globalization, calls for a serious reflection in the churches.

The church ought to expose the dangers of postmodern relativism and dualistic myth of neutrality and seek to give the world and alternative worldview that is biblically faithful and honoring to God. The church should form authentic cultures in education and schooling, medical fields, commercial industries, farming, IT and entertainment and basically every culture. Cultural engagement is part and parcel of the church's mandate of forming cultures and engaging them for Christ. The Korean church must now act robustly and use its influence, resources and time for "credemption."

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