

KOREAN CHRISTIANITY: PASSIONATE BUT TRUNCATED EVANGELISM

Hun Lee

In 1996 I came to Canadian Mennonite Bible College (CMBC) to learn Mennonite theology and practice. A holistic mission of discipleship, a communal spirit, and pacifism has drawn me to be a Mennonite in a new journey to follow Christ.

Before I came to Canada, I had been a Presbyterian pastor for ten years in a mega church with a membership of around eight thousand. The church is perhaps one of the most rapidly growing churches in Korea. I hear that the membership of the church has increased now to sixty thousand with eight worship campuses in Korea. Around fifteen churches have been planted in Japan, China, and North America. The church has sent over seven hundred missionaries overseas. You may have heard that the biggest church in the world is in Korea, whose membership is around 300 thousand.

The growing churches are comprised of evangelical conservatives and are characterized by lively worship where members praise Jesus as their savior, inviting unbelievers into the revival movement, passionate prayer, and passionate outreach. Salvation is simple. Believe in God. Accept Jesus Christ as your personal savior. Then you are saved. Your sins are forgiven. You are guaranteed entry into the Kingdom of God.

Believe in Jesus and the Kingdom of heaven is yours. That's the simple understanding I believe most Korean Christians have of the words 'Jesus saves.' Non-believers are all destined for hell, so evangelism is the first and foremost mission. All other missionary works are basically for bringing souls to Christ; if they don't do this, these works are in vain. Searching for lost ones and bringing them to Christ is the priority every believer should seek.

In addition to that understanding there is one more. Salvation is understood as a change of status: from slavery to freedom, from curse to blessing, from servant to beloved child, from poverty to riches. The biggest church is famous for its focus on a threefold blessing: the well-being of your soul, the well-being of your health, and the well-being of all things, with an emphasis on

Hun Lee is a Mennonite pastor in London ON, Canada.

financial success. The church is very firm in this understanding. Let me explain later why this is the case.

Basically, Jesus Christ as Lord and as our example to follow is not emphasized or seems neglected because it emphasizes human effort rather than the receiving of the grace Jesus offers us. Salvation is understood as individual blessing, which means enjoying personal peace and prosperity. Such a tendency in the Christian churches' teaching and practice has caused Korean Christians to neglect community building in their personal and church life, and resulted in selfishness, boasting and the enjoyment of their privileges.

Last summer, a Taliban terrorist group kidnapped twenty-three Korean Christians, who were in Afghanistan for short-term mission service. Among those taken, two men were executed, but the other twenty-one could return home safely after around a month of terrifying captivity. The tragic news spread all over the world, and made many people curious about why they went to one of the most dangerous countries and how they dared to try to evangelize the people there. They were not professional missionaries. They were ordinary Christians who just wanted to spend their summer vacation more meaningfully. They did not know how dangerous it was there. They just expected a good and meaningful experience for Jesus' sake. They simply believed that they would be safe because they were working to bring Jesus' salvation to others. If they could return safely after a happy experience, they might share with many people their triumphant stories such as how they won many souls through their service and witness. They may have wanted to encourage many other Christians to do outreach and witness to Jesus Christ without any hesitation or fear. Actually, many Christian churches send young people to foreign countries each year on mission or service trips.

Korean Christians and churches seem so passionate about evangelism. It is easy to meet Korean missionaries anywhere in the world even in dangerous places. There are many Christian young adults who are passionate in mission and evangelism especially to unreached peoples. Churches and mission agencies send people easily and candidates go easily. Korea is ranked second in terms of the numbers of present overseas missionaries sent by the churches or by the mission agencies, which consist of evangelical conservatives. Theological schools in Korea are always full of candidates to be pastors or missionaries. Why? Why are Korean

Christians so passionate in evangelism? Before we answer that question, let me share a painful story resulting from such passionate evangelism.

Surprisingly, when the twenty-one who were kidnaped in Afghanistan returned home safely, Koreans did not welcome and comfort them. Rather, the tired workers were ridiculed, blamed, and cursed by many people. Actually during their captivity in Afghanistan most Koreans did not show any pity or compassion toward them. The first and dominant response to the situation was anger; but the anger was not directed against the terrorists but against the captives. Some even said cruelly that they wanted them to be executed and not to return home. Why? Why do most Koreans hate them? In order to understand such an unexpected response, we need to understand the general attitude of Koreans toward Christianity especially the Protestant groups.

By the 1980s I think Christianity was welcomed and respected by most Koreans, but during the recent decades a mood has arisen that is not receptive to Christianity, and now there are strong anti-Christian groups. The terrifying response of the people to the captives is a kind of explosion of anti-Christian sentiment. These young Christians are not persecuted but are blamed for what happened and are seen as deserving the treatment they got at the hands of the kidnapers. Now many Christian leaders feel Christianity is on the decline in Korea. I think it is time for Korean churches and Christians to reflect on their shortcomings in spite of their passionate evangelism and remarkable church growth.

Christianity, especially Protestantism, is only slightly over 100 years old in Korea. But I believe Korea is the only country in Asia where Christianity has prevailed and been successful. Twenty-five percent of the Korean population is known as Christian, and if we research the rate among those of the high social class, such as people who are well educated, high salaried, and dominant in the political, economic, educational areas, we may find it is over forty percent. Some might be curious about why Christianity has been so successful in Korea in comparison to other Asian countries. The reason is deeply related to the concept of "salvation."

There are two factors that are related to the success of Christianity in Korea.

1. Timing

When Christianity was introduced to the Korean people it was a time of chaos. Most Protestant missionaries came to Korea when the Chosun dynasty had lost its power under the pressure of a foreign power struggle among the Americans, Japanese, Russians, and Chinese, finally followed by the Japanese victory and rule over the Korean peninsula for over thirty-five years. Under the oppression of the non-Christian nation of Japan, the Korean people felt like the Israelites oppressed by Egypt.

Under the Japanese oppression, Koreans were ready to listen to the gospel of salvation by Western missionaries and hoped for liberation from slavery. Fortunately, Japan was defeated in the Second World War and Korea experienced liberation through help from Western Christian countries, especially the United States. While most Asian countries had been invaded and ruled by Western Christian countries, Korea had been invaded and ruled by non-Christian Japan and liberated by Christian countries.

2. Initiative

As liberation from oppression was made possible through the initiative of Christian countries, the first new Korean government established after Japanese rule consisted of mostly Christians who experienced much help from western missionaries. However, the Korean War, a civil war that lasted for three years, made the whole country impoverished and desperate. But again we experienced the wonderful help initiated by Christian countries, while the Communists had brought only disaster. Since then Korean people have overcome the disastrous situation, and the political, economic and social leadership of Korea has been put mostly in the hands of Christians. Now you can understand why Christianity was more successful in Korea than in other Asian countries.

Unfortunately, Korean Christianity is now on the decline. Clearly this is because of our misunderstanding of Jesus' salvation, which I believe is not just personal but more relational and communal, not for us but for others, not for being served and respected by others but for serving and respecting others.

Interestingly, the decline of Korean Christianity is happening at the same time as a change in attitude toward the United States. The great America has been seen as the land of milk and honey and the people there as those who voluntarily

help and serve the oppressed and poor countries. America has been seen as a Good Samaritan to a real friend in need. Such a mood does not exist any longer in Korea. Since the 1990s, when Korean young adults have come to realize that the Western Christian countries (or the U.S) have approved political tyrannies, oppressed and killed innocent people and are selfishly seeking their own interests, the mood has radically changed.

A strong anti-American, anti-western movement began here and there and it is gaining supporters, especially among young people. Its target for attack is Christianity, since from a Korean perspective Christianity and America (which represents Western countries) cannot be separated from each other.

Korean Christianity with its admiration for Western society has been prosperous, has taken much advantage of this position, and has had significant power in most areas of Korean society. I think now the privileges should be taken away and Christian churches should kneel down and repent. That is the salvation in Christ. If the first salvation was the liberation from oppression, poverty, and disaster just like the Israelites had experienced, the second salvation should be liberation from worldly desires and self-centeredness, just like the Israelites experienced when they were exiled to Babylon after they had become like the surrounding people in Canaan.

Jesus saves! I see this as liberation, liberation that allows for following Christ more fully. There is one more thing I believe we Korean Christians should be liberated from: our strong cultural tradition, especially the Confucian hierarchical structure of relationships. No Korean is free from it. Though Confucian culture has the strength to protect family values, it justifies and supports discrimination among people. Only one-way respect is required instead of mutual respect. Church structure is understood and practiced as hierarchical rather than horizontal. Status is very important in a class-oriented society. Sadly, Korean Christians seem to seek a higher status in society and even in their churches. Christianity needs to be saved from such cultural captivity.

Jesus saves! In the early years of Korean Christianity, salvation was above all the liberation from oppression and disaster. Hope for the future was always in believers' hearts and they trusted in God's initiative. The passionate evangelism began there. As an Anabaptist, I believe true evangelism is

proclaiming Jesus not only as our Savior but also our Lord and example to follow in every aspect of our lives.

Now is the time for Korean Christianity to think of salvation as liberation from self-centered desire, which follows the American dream and our hierarchical culture, which justifies discrimination. I hope Korean Christians and churches can walk humbly and work with Jesus at the grassroots for the restoration of broken relationships among our own people.