

## MISSION TO KOREA

*Samuel H. Moffett*

Koreans themselves were the first effective evangelists to their own country. Earlier foreign missions, both Catholic and Protestant, left no lasting results, notably those of the Jesuit chaplain De Cespedes (1592), the German pietist Karl Gutzlaff (1832), and R.J. Thomas, the Welsh Congregationalist who was martyred in Pyongyang in 1866. Nor is there any real proof in history that the ancient Nestorian missions from Persia, which reached China as early as 635 A.D., ever had contact with Korea.

## The Catholic Century (1784-1884)

Catholicism took root in Korea only after a Korean Confucian scholar, Yi Seung-Hoon, met some Catholic missionaries in Peking and was baptized as "Peter Lee" to carry the gospel back to his homeland in 1784, ten years before any foreign missionary was able to penetrate the "Hermit Kingdom" of Korea. Yi and a group of friends had discovered a Christian book by Matthew Ricci, the great 17th century Jesuit missionary to China and the group had sent him to the Chinese capital to investigate further. Yi only imperfectly understood the faith he had embraced, but passed it on to his fellow Koreans with zeal.

Ten years later, in 1794, the bishop in Peking sent a Chinese priest, James Chu, to better instruct the growing church. He was the first foreign missionary to work in Korea. It is true that one foreign priest, De Cespedes, had come briefly in the 16th century, but he was not, strictly speaking, a missionary to Koreans. He was a chaplain with the invading Japanese troops of Hideyoshi. Among Chu's early followers were members of one of the most famous Confucian families in the land, the Chung family of

Kwangju in Kyonggi province. Chung Ta-San, a leader of the Silhak school, and his younger brother, Chung Yak-Jong, were both attracted to the new faith. But Confucian conservatives denounced it as treasonable. In the persecution of 1801 both James Chu and Chung Yak-Jong suffered martyrdom. There is no convincing evidence that the more famous older brother ever actually became a Christian.

Still by the turn of the century no western priest had reached Korea as a missionary. The first was Father Pierre Maubant who crossed the Yalu in 1835 and crawled secretly into the city of Euiju through a sewer drain in the city wall. Father Maubant was martyred in 1839. The last great persecution took place in 1866 under the Regent, the Tae-won-gun, when perhaps two thousand Catholic believers were executed for the faith. But despite almost a hundred years of harassment and persecution, in 1882 when Korea finally began to open its doors to the outer world, there may have been as many as 17,000 Catholics surviving in Korea.

### Protestant Beginnings (1832-1893)

As with the Catholics, so also with the Protestants. It was a Korean merchant, Suh (or So) Sang-Yun, converted by Scottish missionaries in Manchuria, who gathered the first group of Protestant believers together in his home village a whole year before the first resident Protestant missionaries were allowed to enter the country. Earlier, in 1832, a German missionary to China, the Rev. Karl Gutzlaff, had explored some of Korea's western islands. Later, in 1865, the Rev. Robert J. Thomas, a Congregationalist from Wales, was the first to attempt an extended Protestant mission in Korea. He came that year for a month, learned a little of the language, and returned the next year aboard the ill-fated trading ship the General Sherman. It was attacked on the river below Pyongyang, burned, and all aboard killed. It is said that Thomas managed to hand some Chinese Scripture portions to the man who killed him.

But none of these early attempts produced permanent results. Suh Sang-Yun was the pioneer Protestant evangelist. He

had helped John Ross and John MacIntyre in Manchuria to translate parts of the New Testament into Korean, and then in 1883 he himself brought the printed Scriptures into Korea at considerable personal risk. His own home on the Ongjin peninsula of Hwang-hae province was the first Protestant "house church" in the land.

The first resident Protestant foreign missionary arrived in Korea a year later, in 1884. He was Horace Allen, M.D., a Presbyterian physician who transferred from China to Seoul in September of that year. His medical skill saved the life of a royal prince and although public evangelism was still prohibited, the next year Allen received as his reward permission to open a small hospital in Seoul. This tiny institution was the predecessor of the modern Severance Hospital and was the first legally recognized Christian institution within Korea's borders.

The first Protestant clergy missionaries followed soon afterward in April 1885. They were Horace G. Underwood, a Presbyterian, and Henry G. Appenzeller, a Methodist. Underwood performed the first baptism of a Korean inside Korea in 1886 and organized the first Protestant church (now Saemoonan Presbyterian Church) in 1887, in Seoul. A few weeks later Appenzeller held the first Methodist public worship service in what became the Chungdong Methodist Church. By that time he had already organized Korea's first Christian school, the Paichai Academy, in 1886. It numbered among its early students Syngman Rhee, later to become the first president of the Republic of Korea (1948). A particularly dramatic Christian breakthrough came in 1887 with the opening of Korea's first school for girls under the leadership of the Methodist missionary Mrs. Mary Scranton. It was called the Ewha Academy.

The treaty ports of Seoul, Inchon, and Pusan, and especially Seoul, were thus early opened to the gospel. However, the interior of the country was still closed to missionary residence until Samuel A. Moffett moved permanently into north Korea in 1892-93. There, the city of Pyongyang soon became the center of Christian expansion.

### The Rise of the Korean Church (1894–1910)

It was up in northeast Korea, beginning about 1895, that Protestant church growth in Korea began a spectacular advance that was unmatched in the Christian world of that time. It reached its climax in the Great Korean Revival of 1907–08. The number of Protestant adherents in Korea leaped from a couple of hundred in 1890, to 50,000 in 1905, and to more than 200,000 by 1909. Communicant membership, of course was much lower, because admission standards were very strict, usually requiring a year or more of supervised preparation for new converts before they could be approved for baptism.

What made the Korean church grow? Some attribute it to the crumbling of Korean political and social institutions in this period. Japanese military influence supplanted the influence of the Chinese. Queen Min was murdered. The 500-year-old Yi dynasty fell, and Korea became a colony of Japan. As the old foundations disintegrated, confidence in Korea's old religions, Confucianism and Buddhism, waned and the more primitive native faiths began to lose prestige. To many Koreans it seemed that the time was ripe to turn to a faith that promised solid hope and eternal foundations.

Some turned to the new faith not as much for personal comfort as for hope of national renewal. Christian schools were culturally revolutionary and different. They were the first to enroll girls and to introduce exciting new fields of western learning such as mathematics, science, music, and even athletics.

Also important was the adoption by the Presbyterians of a successful missionary strategy for church planting, the Nevius, or "three-self" plan, which called for self-governing, self-supporting, and self-propagating leadership of an autonomous national church. It began with emphasis on Bible study for all believers in widely organized Bible classes. In 1901 the first seminary was organized in Pyongyang to provide specialized training for the Christian ministry.

The beginnings of church organization in Korea were emphatically ecumenical, and this broad base also contributed to the early growth of the church. The four different Presbyterian

missions (i.e., northern and southern U.S., Australian, and Canadian Presbyterians) agreed to drop their home-base divisions and join hands to form a single Presbyterian church in Korea. For this purpose, as early as 1889 they established an organization of inter-mission cooperation they called the Presbyterian Council. It was to function in a limited way like a temporary "mission church" that quite purposefully chose not to call itself a denomination, waiting for the day when the growing Korean community of Christians could form a nationwide Korean church.

By 1892 enthusiasm for missionary cooperation overleaped old confessional boundaries and brought Methodists and Presbyterians into a comity agreement that divided the Peninsula into non-competitive geographical spheres of influence. And as early as 1889 the missions had pooled their talents and resources for literary and translation work and had formed the Korean Religious Tract Society (forerunner of the Korean Christian Literature Society). In schools and hospitals, as well, Protestant missionary cooperation overcame denominational barriers, as when in 1905 the Presbyterians welcomed Methodist participation in the foundation of Union Christian College in Pyongyang (now Soongsil University in Seoul). It was the first school in Korea to grant college degrees. Severance Medical School, formed in 1904 as an outgrowth of Dr. Allen's Royal Hospital and Chosen Christian College (1915) were both ecumenically cooperative ventures and are now combined as divisions of Yonsei University.

The high tide toward union was the year 1905-06 when Presbyterian and Methodist missionaries, preparing for the establishment of "one Korean National Church, to be called the Church of Christ in Korea," brought the six major missions then at work in Korea into a General Council of Evangelical Missions to aim toward the formation of a single national Protestant denomination. It was a goal never realized, but friendly cooperation continued among the separate denominations that began to form from that time on.

In 1907, when the fledgling Pyongyang Presbyterian Seminary graduated its first class of seven men, and for the first time the number of Korean ministers and elders outnumbered the mission-

aries, the missions turned over the church to the Koreans and together they formed a united, independent Korean Presbyterian church. The new church courteously elected a missionary, Dr. S.A. Moffett, founder and president of the seminary, as the first moderator of that first Korean presbytery organization.

Meanwhile, other Protestant missions had entered Korea in the wake of the pioneering northern Presbyterians and Methodists: Australian Presbyterians (1889), southern Presbyterians (1892), Southern Methodists (1896), Canadian Presbyterians (1898), and Seventh Day Adventists (1903). Ernest A. Kilbourne and the Charles Cowmans of the Oriental Missionary Society (now OMS International) came to Korea for evangelistic meetings out of which grew Korea's third largest Protestant denomination, the Korean Evangelical Church. The Salvation Army entered the work in 1908.

But more than anything else, it was the Great Revival of 1907-08 that capped the climax of that early church growth. The outstanding leader of the revival was the Presbyterian evangelist and Bible teacher, Rev. Kil Sun-Ju, who had just been ordained as one of the first seven Korean ministers. It was a cleansing and uniting movement. People confessed past sins, made right old wrongs, and reached out across denominational divisions. As Koreans said to the missionaries afterward, "Some of you go back to John Calvin, and some of you to John Wesley, but we can go back no farther than 1907 when we first really knew the Lord Jesus Christ." Both missionaries and Koreans gave primary credit for growth in the church to the work of the Holy Spirit, to faithful study of the Bible, and to the evangelistic enthusiasm of Korean laymen and laywomen as the cutting edge of Christian outreach.

#### Years of Pressure (1910-1960)

For a while after the final Japanese annexation in 1910, however, constant government harassment perceptibly slowed the growth of the church. A trumped-up conspiracy trial in 1912 tried to implicate the foreign missionaries in the resistance movement and jailed scores of Korean Christians, including the Korean nobleman and Methodist educator, Yun Chi-Ho. The church was

one structure that the Japanese could not control although political pressure did affect its numerical growth. Nevertheless, its inner life and organization was strengthened and its popularity and prestige in the nation as a whole was greatly advanced.

The Presbyterians who had formed an autonomous Korean presbytery in 1907, added other presbyteries and organized a general assembly in 1912, electing Horace G. Underwood, the pioneer Presbyterian clergyman in Korea, as the first moderator of the Assembly. Northern Methodists formed a Korea Conference in 1908, and the Southern Methodists in 1918, but it was not until 1930 that the two conferences became independently Korean and came together as a Korean Methodist Church that was "genuinely Christian, truly Methodist, and really Korean." In the next year, 1931, the Korean Methodists, under their first Korean bishop, Ryang Ju-Sam, were the first denomination in Korea to ordain women to the ministry, beginning with fourteen American missionaries.

In 1912 the General Council of Evangelical Missions in Korea enlarged its function of avoiding unseemly denominational competition and changed its name to the Federal Council of Protestant Evangelical Missions. As more Korean denominations were organized, the Federal Council of Churches and Missions was formed in 1919, changing its name again in 1929 to the Korean National Council of Churches (KNCC), thus narrowing membership to national church denominations and excluding missions and parachurch organizations.

But the Japanese colonial authorities continued to seriously check Christian advance on the Peninsula. The first effects were felt in the Christian schools. The teaching of religion and the Bible was increasingly limited by the government. In 1919 Korean patriotism and Christian passion for freedom combined to touch off one of the most moving nonviolent mass demonstrations for national independence in modern times. Of the thirty-three men who signed the Korean Declaration of Independence, sixteen were Christians. This was almost half the total, though only three percent of the population was then Christian.

Again in the 1930s the church felt the hard hand of Japanese colonial pressure. In an effort to bind the empire into a fighting force for the conquest of all Asia, the Japanese tried to force their national religion, Shinto worship, on all the emperor's subjects. When Christians objected they were severely punished, sometimes martyred. By the end of 1941 all the missionaries had been forced out of Korea.

Four hard years later in the summer of 1945 Koreans greeted the defeat of Japan and the liberation of their country with delirious joy. But their rejoicing was cut short by the arbitrary division of the peninsula, north and south, and the pulverizing Communist invasion of 1950. In the North, the church was wiped out or driven underground. In the South, church growth again soared upward. But the 1950s was a decade of tragic church division. Perhaps because of the military and social instability of those troubled times, almost every major Korean Protestant denomination was racked by schism.

#### Postwar Recovery (1960 – Present)

But through divisions, wars, and persecutions the Korean churches have never lost their capacity to witness and to grow. From the beginning, Korean Christians have been reaching out in mission, first to their own people, and then to the world. One of the first seven Koreans ordained to the Presbyterian ministry in 1907 was sent as a missionary to Cheju Island and missions to Siberia (1909), Japan (1909), and Manchuria (1910) followed. Then the Methodists in 1910 and the Presbyterians in 1912 undertook Korean missions to the mainland Chinese. After World War II the whole world became a mission field for Korea's churches as their missionaries spread out from Thailand to Ethiopia and from Arabia to Los Angeles.

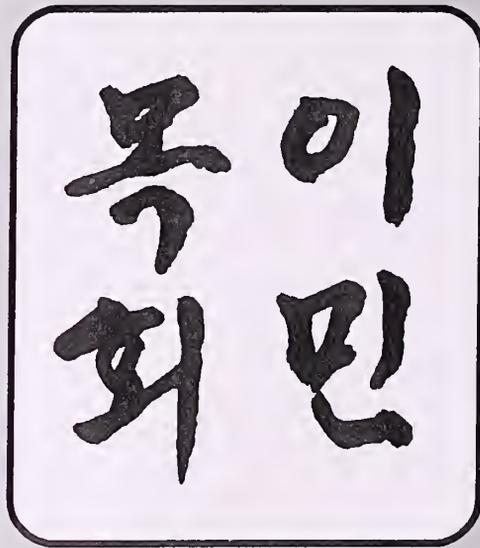
The world Christian mission is now fully a two-way movement in Korea. As the Korean churches sent out their own members as missionaries, after the war new foreign mission groups entered Korea in great numbers: the Southern Baptists, the Evangelical Alliance Mission, several Pentecostal bodies, Nazarenes, the Missouri Synod Lutherans, and many others. The

*1989-90 Missionary and General Directory of Protestant Missions in Korea* (Seoul: Bible Book House, 1989) lists forty-four different Protestant mission groups at work in the southern part of the Peninsula.

Meanwhile, the growth of the Korean church has never ceased to amaze observers of the world Christian mission. In every decade since 1940, the Protestant community has come close to doubling its membership. In 1940 there were only 370,000 Protestant adherents reported, but the 1989 volume of the *Christian Yearbook of Korea* (Seoul: Christian Literature Press.) reported 12,649,000 Korean Christians (10,337,000 Protestants and 2,312,000 Roman Catholics). If heterodox groups like the Unification Church and the Olive Tree Cult are excluded, a reasonable Protestant figure would be approximately 9,400,000. But whatever the actual number of Korean Christians may be, rapid growth creates new problems. Can Korea's Christians survive the temptations of internal affluence and power as they have stood so bravely under external persecution? If their history under God is any guide, they will. But this much, at least, is without doubt; they stand today as one of the larger and stronger Christian communities in the entire world. So much the more demanding are their responsibilities in Christian life and mission.

*EXPANDED ENGLISH EDITION*

# KOREAN AMERICAN MINISTRY



Edited by Sang Hyeon Lee  
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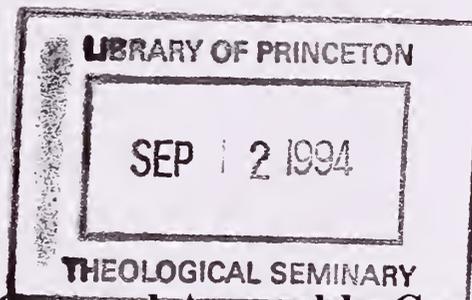
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