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The Korean Pentecost

Elmer L. Towns

My first exposure to the Korean Revival of 1907 was in 1978 when I visited South Korea for the first time. I focused my study on the revival of the church *after* the Korean War (1950-53), it was then I learned of the 1907 Revival.¹

Although Korea was one of the last nations in the Far East to hear the Gospel, a series of revivals early in the twentieth century quickly turned the Korean church into a powerful force for God. These awakenings transformed Korean culture and society and reached beyond its borders to other nations in Asia.

In 1890 Dr. R. A. Hardie, a Canadian Colleges medical missionary, arrived in Korea, a nation that was just beginning to hear the Gospel from foreign missionaries. In 1898 he associated with the Methodists. About that time, missionaries first began reporting a turning to Christianity on the part of Korean nationals. While missionaries rejoiced in the interest shown, they lamented the fact that these new converts showed no evidence of conviction of sin followed by repentance and saving faith. It appears the first "converts" were entering the church "as interested disciples rather than regenerated members."²

In August 1903, seven missionaries gathered in the city of Wonsan for a week of study and prayer. Dr. Hardie confessed he "had not seen any examples of plain, unmistakable, and lasting conversion"³ in his thirteen years of ministry in Korea. Believing the ministry was being hindered by his own failings, he confessed his faults before both the missionaries and the Korean congregation, with others making similar confessions.

Just a few months later, in October of 1903, missionary advocate Fredrik Franson arrived in Korea and was invited to preach. The meetings were marked by open confession of sins.

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Many admitted to theft and offered to make restitution. Church members insisted that restitution be made to the Lord rather than to themselves. As a result, funds were raised for evangelism in the area. During his stay in Korea, Franson impressed upon Hardie and his fellow workers the necessity of prevailing prayer.

In 1905, Japan's victory over Russia resulted in the Japanese occupation of Korea, provoking a new Korean nationalistic spirit. Christians looked to the church to organize resistance. Instead, missionary and church leaders preached forgiveness and forbearance. This preaching was followed by a second wave of revival in 1905 and 1906, described as "a spreading fire" and "a continuing religious awakening."⁴

Hundreds were converted, more than in any previous year in the history of the Korean mission. In Pyongyang, 700 conversions were recorded in a two-week period. Still, the best was yet to come.

The blessing of God continued in 1906. In Pyongyang, a New Year's Day evangelistic crusade drew 4,000 people to the meetings, 20 percent of the city's entire population. A united evangelistic thrust in the nation's capital, Seoul, resulted in 1,000 conversions.⁵

As had been their custom in recent years, the missionaries gathered at Pyongyang for a week of prayer and Bible study in August 1906. Speaker Dr. Howard Agnew Johnston told Korean missionaries of the Welsh Revival and other awakenings in India.⁶ Half of the missionaries then in the nation were Presbyterians and were deeply moved by accounts of revival among Welsh Presbyterians and Presbyterian missionaries in Asia.

News of the other revivals motivated missionaries to intensify their prayer for a similar outpouring in Korea. Throughout the fall of 1907 and the following winter, missionaries gathered in the church each morning at five o'clock to pour out their hearts to God. During one week together, the missionaries studied the First Epistle of John, which later became their textbook for revival.⁷

The New Year's Day Bible Conference

It was the custom of the Korean church leaders to gather at Pyongyang each New Year's Day for a ten-day Bible conference. In January 1907, 1,500 men gathered together, representing the leadership of hundreds of churches. For almost six months, missionaries had been praying for a mighty movement of God among the Korean church, and anticipation grew as the meetings began.

On Monday afternoon, several missionaries gathered to-

gether for prayer. They pleaded with God to move among them. One of their number later testified, "We were bound in spirit and refused to let God go till He blessed us."⁸ That night as they entered the church, it seemed the entire building was filled with the presence of God.

After a brief message, Mr. Lee, a Korean leader, took charge of the meeting and called for prayer. So many men wanted to pray that Lee announced, "If you want to pray like that, all pray." Across the church, the whole congregation began praying at the same time.⁹

The result was not the confusion one might expect, but rather, as one observer noted, "a vast harmony of sound and spirit, like the noise of the surf in an ocean of prayer." (Later this practice came to be called a "concert of prayer.")¹⁰ In the midst of the prayer, many of the men became deeply convicted of their sin. One after another rose to his feet in deep agony to confess his sins and cry out to God for his mercy.

On Tuesday, the missionaries gathered at noon to discuss what had happened the night before. Only a few had been present at the meeting. One who had been present expressed a personal concern, because it was common knowledge that two church leaders had a hostile relationship.

On Monday evening, a Mr. Kang had confessed his hatred for a Mr. Kim, but Kim had remained silent. Several missionaries were concerned about Kim's unwillingness to reconcile. That evening, God answered the prayers of the missionaries in a most unusual way.

As the meeting progressed, Kim sat with the elders behind the pulpit with his head bowed. Suddenly he came to the pulpit. Holding it firmly, he confessed, "I have been guilty of fighting against God. I have been guilty of hating not only Kang You-moon, but Pang Mok-sa." Kim's animosity toward Kang was well known, but Pang Mok-sa was the Korean name of the missionary who had urged others to pray for him.

The revelation of hatred toward the missionary came as a complete surprise to all gathered. Turning to the missionary, Kim continued. "Can you forgive me?" he asked. "Can you pray for me?"

The missionary stood to pray in Korean. He began, "Apage, Apage" ("Father, Father"). That was as far as he got. "It seemed as if the roof was lifted from the building and the Spirit of God came down from heaven in a mighty avalanche of power among us," the missionary later reported. "I fell at Kim's side and wept and prayed as I had never prayed before."¹¹

Across the auditorium, hundreds stood with arms stretched

out toward heaven calling on God. Others lay prostrate on the floor. Hundreds cried out to God for mercy.

While they had been praying for revival for months, when it came the missionaries were terrified. Many in the church were in deep mental anguish. Others struggling to resist God were seen clenching their fists and banging their heads against the ground.

Some feared that allowing the meeting to continue would result in some people going crazy, yet they knew they dared not interfere with the work of the Holy Spirit. Finally, they agreed to end the meeting at two o'clock in the morning, six hours after it had begun. Throughout the rest of the conference, similar events were repeated daily.

The Impact of the Revival

The deep reviving of the Korean church leadership had an immediate impact on both the churches and the communities those churches sought to reach. The men returned to their homes as *carriers of revival*.¹² When the story of the Bible conference revival was retold, a similar revival swept the churches.

As the churches were revived, they were gripped by a burning passion to reach the lost in their community. Everywhere, revived churches began to see "drunkards, gamblers, adulterers, murderers, thieves, self-righteous, Confucianists and others" transformed into new creatures in Christ.¹³

The revival had an almost immediate impact in the nation's Christian colleges. Ninety percent of the students at Union Christian College in Pyongyang professed conversion in February 1907. Many also sensed God's call upon their lives as evangelists. They carried the revival beyond the city and into village churches throughout Korea.

From 1905 to 1910, the Korean churches recorded 79,221 additions in membership. That was more than the total number of Japanese church members after fifty years of missionary effort. It was also twice the number of Chinese Protestants after eighty years of missionary labors. By 1912, there were about 300,000 Korean Protestant church members in a nation of twelve million people.¹⁴

The Korean Pentecost was quickly recognized as a movement of God by Christian leaders around the world. The Edinburgh World Missionary Conference of 1910 declared, "The Korean Revival ... has been a genuine Pentecost, for Korean church membership quadrupled in a decade."¹⁵

The Student Volunteer Movement, an American voluntary association promoting world missions, cited six evidences of "the present day work of the Holy Spirit in Korea" the same

year. These evidences included: "(1) the unity and cooperation which prevailed among Christians, (2) the remarkable numerical growth of the churches, (3) the wonderful religious awakening of 1907 which affected 50,000 converts, (4) the noteworthy interest in the Word of God, (5) the dedication of national Christians to service, including generous giving, and (6) the wonderful prayer life of the Korean Church."¹⁶

Although the Korean church represented only about 1 percent of the entire population in Korea, it influenced daily life in a far greater way because of two unique conditions imposed upon new converts. First, missionaries required illiterate Korean adult converts to learn to read Korean in a simple phonetic alphabet before they could be admitted to membership.

Samuel Moffatt wrote a simple book to instruct converts to read so they could read the Bible. It is not clear whether he invented or simply inspired a simple phonics alphabet of Korean letters. Whereas traditional Oriental language (Chinese, Japanese, and Korean) letters were historically pictured in nature, Moffatt's grammar book instructed students to learn phonetically letters then speak out words by sound.

Remember, Old Testament Hebrew was one of the first phonetical languages in a culture of pictorial letters (Chaldean, Ugaritic, etc.).

Also, Moffatt wrote sentences from left to right according to Western civilization, not right to left according to Oriental custom. Without realizing it, Moffatt caused the Koreans to read lineally, which made them think lineally, a dominant Western trait. The Korean thought patterns are more like Western civilization than other Oriental languages reflect Oriental civilization. No wonder South Korea is the shining light of American missionary endeavors out of all places the Gospel has been carried.

Second, Korean patriots viewed Christians as Japanese collaborators because they cut their hair as the missionaries and Japanese did rather than in the traditional Korean style. To distinguish between collaborators and Christians, the patriots required Christians to recite chapters from the Bible to prove they were Christians. The result was a 100 percent literacy rate among Christians in a largely illiterate nation. Their ability to read made Christians the natural leaders of the Korean society.

Prayer and Fasting

The Korean Revival was born out of intense prayer, and prayer remained an integral part of Korean church life throughout the twentieth century. In many churches, "concerts of prayer" are still practiced in Sunday morning services, with the

whole church confessing their sins to God and then calling on God in unison for his blessing. In what have come to be called the "Dawn Meetings," many Koreans still gather every morning at their churches at five o'clock for prayer. Friday nights are devoted to all-night prayer meetings.

Fasting with prayer is widely practiced. More than 5,000 "prayer mountains" have been established—mountain retreats where Christians go for days or weeks of prayer. The prayer life of the Korean church remains a role model for Christians around the world. No wonder that by the year 2000, a third of the Korean population had become members of a Christian church.

Writer

Towns, Elmer L. Address: Liberty University, School of Religion, 1971 University Blvd., Lynchburg, VA 24502. Email: eltowns@liberty.edu. Elmer Towns, best known as a college and seminary professor, currently serves as Dean of the School of Religion and Vice President at Liberty University, Lynchburg, VA, which he co founded. He is widely known beyond university settings as a worldwide authority on Sunday school and church growth. He has written more than 2,000 magazine articles, and published more than 50 books. He has also created many popular church resources such as Friend Day, and received numerous awards, such as the coveted Gold Medallion Award from the Christian Booksellers Association. He is also co-founder of Church Growth Institute, Lynchburg, VA, a resource outlet for biblical and instructional material. His academic degrees come from Northwestern College, Southern Methodist University, Dallas Theological Seminary, Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary, and Fuller Theological Seminary.

NOTES

1. My first book on revival was *The Ten Largest Sunday Schools*, (Elmer Towns, Grand Rapids, MI, Baker Book House, 1969), which focused on the Baby Boomer Revival (1965-1975) which included a study of the growth/revival of Yonggi Cho and the Full Gospel Church, Yoido Island, Seoul, Korea. My next book was *Rivers of Revival* (Neil Anderson and Elmer Towns, Ventura, CA, Regal Books, 1997). Anderson focused on revival within the individual and I focused revival in the church and culture. My third book was *The Ten Greatest Revivals* (Elmer Towns and Douglas Porter, Richmond, VA, Academx, 2005).

2. Elmer Towns and Douglas Porter, *The Ten Greatest Revivals Ever* (Virginia Beach, VA: Academx Publishing Service, Inc.), 41.

3. *Ibid.*

4. *Ibid.*, 16. Revival is described as “An evangelical revival is an extraordinary work of God in which Christians repent of their sins as they become intensely aware of his presence in their midst, and they manifest a positive response to God in renewed obedience to the known will of God, resulting in both a deepening of their individual and corporate experience with God, and an increased concern to win others to Christ.

5. *Ibid.*, 42.

6. *Ibid.*

7. *Ibid.*

8. *Ibid.*, 43.

9. *Ibid.*

10. *Ibid.*, 44.

11. *Ibid.*

12. *Ibid.*, 44. A carrier of revival is a term introduced by J. Edwin Orr that means a person takes a torch of fire from a revival and begins another similar experience in another place by testimony or sharing reports of the original revival. Because there are several types of revival, a carrier of revival reproduced the same elements of revival. There are at least nine different “faces” of revivals listed in *Rivers of Revival*, (Neil Anderson and Elmer Towns, Ventura, CA, Regal Books, 1997, 116-117): Blessing encounter, Deeper life encounter, Truth encounter, Sin encounter, Worship encounter, Holy Spirit encounter, Conversion encounter, Culture encounter, and Power encounter.

13. *Ibid.*, 18. Was the Korean Revival a major revival? The book, *The Ten Greatest Revival* lists questions to ask when determining the greatness of a revival. (1) Does the experience fit the biblical portrait of revival? (2) Was there a demonstration of God’s presence? (3) Was the larger body of Christ awakened to its New Testament tasks? (4) Was the surrounding culture impacted positively by the revival? (5) Are there reliable sources that demonstrate the greatness of the revival?

14. *Ibid.*, 45.

15. *Ibid.*

16. *Ibid.*