

진실로 너희에게 이르노니 너희
중에 두 사람이 땅에서
합심하여 무엇이든지 구하면
하늘
저희를
두 세
곳에는 나도 그들 중에
있느니라.

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마태복음 Matthew 18: 19-20

Again, truly I tell you, if two of you agree on earth about anything you ask, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven. For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them. (NRSV)

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Ministries & Theology*

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Korean Preaching from a Western Perspective

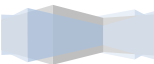
Daniel J. Adams

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Introduction

Worship is central to Korean church life and virtually every event of significance begins and ends with a worship service which usually involves a sermon. I have lived and worked in Korea since 1980 serving as a professor of systematic theology at Hanil University and Presbyterian Theological Seminary near the city of Jeonju in the southwestern region of the country. Over the past twenty-eight years I have listened to hundreds of Korean sermons—in Sunday morning worship services, in university chapel services, at numerous retreats, and in worship services held at seminars and conferences. Even the annual meeting of the Korea Association of Christian Studies (the Korean equivalent of the American Academy of Religion) begins and ends with a worship service and preaching is central to both services. The average Korean pastor may preach three sermons each week—at the Sunday morning worship service, at the Sunday afternoon or evening worship service, and at the Wednesday evening mid-week prayer service. In addition brief sermons are preached at the daily dawn prayer service. This adds up to a staggering total of 156 Sunday and Wednesday sermons and 365 brief sermons for the daily dawn prayer services. When one adds in special occasions such as retreats, conferences and seminars, school and university chapel services, and annual revival meetings the number of sermons preached by the average pastor easily exceeds 500 in any given year.

Clearly preaching in the Korean church occupies a central position and this is, perhaps, the first difference that becomes obvious to the western observer.¹ Although I have lived and worked in Korea for almost thirty years, I never cease to be amazed at the diligence of the



Korean pastors in sermon preparation. One of the reasons for this diligence is that in the Korean church, and in Korean society in general, the pastor occupies a position of authority that far exceeds that found in most western churches.

1. The Authority of the Korean Pastor

When Korean pastors preach, members of the congregation listen, for within the Confucian structure of Korean society with its hierarchy, the pastor is quite naturally an authority figure.² In the words of Kang Shin-Myung, “The idea of respecting king, teacher, and father is so strongly emphasized in Confucianism that even pastors are given great authority as respect in society.”³ This is especially true in the rural areas where the pastor is often the most highly educated person in a given village and frequently serves as a community leader. Even in the large city churches the pastor is looked up to and respected as the leader and primary teacher. The pastor, more than any other person, sets the tone for the style of worship and the order of church life.

This pastoral leadership role was of particular importance in the early history of the church when pastors were the leaders in the Independence Movement against the Japanese colonial empire. Writes Kang: “Accordingly pastors were the center of the Christian movement.”⁴ This leadership has continued during the struggle against the military governments of the 1970s and 1980s and in the various other mass movements and extended beyond the churches to society at large.

A recent example concerns the mass demonstrations against U.S. beef imports during the first half of 2008. When the demonstrations turned violent and seriously threatened social order, the government turned to the religious leaders. On successive nights the Catholic priests held mass, the Buddhist monks held sutra chanting services, and the Protestant pastors held public prayer meetings in front of the Seoul City Hall. Out of respect for the social position of the clergy, the riot police retreated to the sidelines, the rioters held off on further violent actions, and the demonstrations soon came to an end. In the Confucian society of Korea, religious leaders, including Christian pastors, have an authority through their preaching which extends even to the sphere of public life.

Lee Jung Young points out a second source of authority which also derives from traditional culture—the pastor must be a person of the Spirit and is thus a shamanistic figure.⁵ Shamanism is the oldest religious tradition in Korea and shamans are considered to be messengers of the spirits. In a similar manner, pastors are viewed as messengers from God—persons filled with the Holy Spirit who preach with the Spirit’s power. Thus pastors focus more on the personal dimensions of the spiritual life, and emotion and feelings are given precedence over reason and intellectual doctrine.⁶ Over the years I have listened to sermons which are punctuated by emotional actions on the part of the preacher such as weeping, singing, shouting “hallelujah” and expecting a vigorous “amen” response from the congregation, leading periods of audible individual prayers, and engaging the congregation in shouting “Oh Lord!” with arms raised in praise. In one Sunday morning worship service in a large urban Presbyterian church I counted a total of 186 audible shouts of “amen” by the congregation, 111 of which were during the preaching of the sermon. Within the context of American mainline churches, of course, such displays of emotion are considered most improper. In Korea such emotionalism is understood as a way of demonstrating the personal spiritual authority of the pastor.

2. Korean Sermons are Theologically Conservative

Long-time Presbyterian missionary Paul S. Crane once wrote that “Koreans tend to be very conservative theologically. They may be classified as conservative, more conservative, and most conservative.”⁷ Theological conservatism is the first of three characteristics of the Korean church and its pastoral leadership, the other two being Bible centered and revivalistic.⁸

As an American schooled in a relatively liberal mainline Presbyterian ethos, the conservatism of Korean preaching is one of the most obvious characteristics which came to my attention. Life situation sermons, allusions to literature and film, quotations from well-known theologians, and liberal interpretations of biblical miracles are almost totally absent. Sermons tend to focus on the simple message of the gospel, doctrine is presented in a straightforward non-critical manner, and the miracles of scripture are understood to be historical and absolutely literal. While passing reference may occasionally be made to John Calvin, modern theologians are almost never mentioned. When I first arrived in Korea it seemed as if such conservative

preaching was totally irrelevant to the contemporary situation. “How then,” I asked myself, “does the Korean church show so much vitality and power?”

The answer, I found, is in a unique combination of conservative theology coupled with radical forms of social action. Two great preachers from the past serve to illustrate this point. The first is Kil Sun-Ju (1869-1936) who was one of the first seven graduates of the Presbyterian Theological Seminary in Pyongyang in 1907. His conservative credentials are impeccable. He founded the Korean tradition of dawn prayer meetings, preached in a revivalist tradition, was fundamentalist in his theology, held to a literal belief of the second coming of Christ, and in later life turned against involvement in politics and social action in favor of apocalyptic preaching.⁹ In earlier years, however, he was deeply involved in politics and was one of the Christian pastors who signed the March 1, 1919 Declaration of Independence against the Japanese colonial government. In recent years church historians are drawing attention to the political and social side of his ministry.¹⁰ His later turn toward apocalyptic preaching was due largely to the failure of the political process to achieve Korean independence from Japan during his lifetime.

Perhaps even more dramatic is the life and death of Chu Ki-Chol (1897-1944). A 1927 graduate of the Presbyterian Theological Seminary in Pyongyang, Chu was one of Korea’s most dynamic preachers, and his sermons continue to inspire readers to this very day. His theology was conservative and it was his conservative interpretation of the Bible which led to his refusal to bow before the Shinto shrines. To bow before such a shrine could only be considered as idolatry and a betrayal of the Christian faith. Chu was imprisoned four times as a result, and he died in prison as a martyr on April 21, 1944. Prior to his final imprisonment he preached his last sermon “My Five-Fold Prayer” in which asked God to “Help me defeat the power of death; help me to endure long suffering; I entrust my aging mother, my wife, my children, and my church members to the Lord; help me to live righteously and die righteously; and O Lord Jesus! I entrust my soul to you.”¹¹ On the face of it his final sermon reflected nothing more than conservative theology and traditional Confucian family values. His imprisonment and martyrdom, however, were interpreted as the most radical form of protest against the Japanese government. As a result “On July 10, 1968, the government of the Republic of Korea formally declared him to be an Honored Patriot and placed a stone to his memory in the National Military Cemetery in Seoul.”¹²

In these two great preachers from the past I began to understand the power of Korean preaching in the present. The theology may be conservative and other-worldly, but the lives of the preachers are firmly rooted in Korean society and the struggles of the Korean people.

3. Korean Sermons are Biblically Based

Korean Christians are truly a “people of the Book” so it is not at all surprising that all sermons are biblically based. It is unthinkable for a Korean pastor to preach a sermon that is not firmly grounded in scripture. Most sermons are expository in nature or use biblical texts to call the congregation to a higher level of Christian commitment. Following the reading of the biblical text, the Bible is kept open throughout the preaching of the sermon and members of the congregation closely follow along in the text and frequently underline key passages. In place of pew racks (everyone carries their own Bible and hymnbook to church) there is a small shelf where the open Bible is placed. Sometimes the pastor will ask the congregation to read key verses aloud in unison. Verse-by-verse exposition of scripture is also quite common during the sermon. Throughout the preaching of the sermon there is a dynamic relationship between the pastor, the Bible, and the congregation.

After hearing countless expository sermons and sermons calling for a deeper personal Christian commitment, I began to wonder, “Do Korean pastors ever preach on issues of social justice? Does the biblical text ever call one to social action and concern?” Although such sermons are uncommon, when they do occur they are preached with tremendous power and they are always based upon a biblical text. Unlike many social justice sermons in the American context, where no actual response is forthcoming, Korean social justice sermons are a clear call for action on the part of the hearers. Two such sermons come to mind. Both were preached during the military regime in the 1980s and both were preached in churches in the city of Jeonju.

The first took place following the disclosure that an industrial firm was intentionally bypassing pollution control equipment and dumping carcinogenic waste into the Naktong River in the southeastern part of the country. The result was that the water supply for the metropolitan area of Taegu, Korea’s third largest city, was contaminated. When it became known that the government had allowed the company to do this “in the interest of national economic development” and that previous attempts to make this known had been hushed up, the result was

national outrage. I can still remember Rev. Song Bong-Kyu of Sung Ahm Presbyterian Church, who is now retired, standing in the pulpit with the Bible in one hand and the newspaper with its glaring headlines in the other hand. “How,” he asked, “can we allow this to happen in our country? We have only one country and the Bible tells us that we cannot destroy the land that God has given us!” He preached a sermon, based on Genesis 1:26-31 that will long be remembered. As the congregation exited the church they were greeted by members of the youth fellowship asking them to sign petitions to present to the government protesting such a flagrant abuse of the environment.

The second occurred in the aftermath of a student demonstration against the military government which took place in the center of the city. Riot police were pursuing some of the students who took refuge in a nearby church. The riot police followed the students into the church and fired tear gas canisters inside the church breaking several of the stained glass windows in the process. When church officials asked the local governor (who at that time was appointed by the central government in Seoul) to apologize and pay for the repair of the damage, the governor refused. The following Sunday, rousing sermons were preached in all of Jeonju’s 250 Christian churches. In at least one church the text was from II Chronicles 28:24 which refers directly to the topic of profaning the temple and destroying temple fixtures.

This particular Sunday was different from all other Sundays in that the pastors asked their congregations—in their sermons—to take to the streets and demonstrate against the government. The result was one of the largest public demonstrations that Jeonju has ever seen. Traffic into the central section of the city was paralyzed for hours as congregations from all of the city’s churches filled the streets. On Monday the governor went on local radio and television and issued a formal apology and promised to repair the damage at government expense. He further assured the churches that never again would the riot police violate the sanctuary of any church within his jurisdiction.

Through preaching, the Bible is a powerful tool for change—both in one’s person spiritual life and in society at large. According to Chung ChangBok, preaching brings theology and the problems of daily life together and “through this relationship preaching will expound the complete counsel of God to the people who look to the preacher for guidance in living the Christian life.”¹³

4. Korean Sermons are Revivalistic in Tone

Every spring, Korean churches hold an annual revival meeting which usually runs for a minimum of three days and sometimes up to an entire week. To attend a Korean revival meeting is an experience which involves one's entire being. The preaching is loud and confrontational and a clear commitment to Christ is called for. There is much shouting and many exclamations of "hallelujah" and "amen." There is group prayer accompanied by weeping and intense emotion. Some members of the congregation shake their entire bodies as they literally cry out to God in prayer. The preacher calls out for conversion to Christ, repentance and a turning away from sin, and a recommitment to faithful Christian living. To an American Presbyterian, and especially to one who is a theologian such as myself, these annual revivals are a kind of embarrassment, for after all we Presbyterians are supposed to do things "decently and in order."

In Korea, however, this is where the shamanistic spiritual authority of the pastor comes to the fore. To be asked to be the guest preacher for the annual revival meeting at another church is a great honor and a sign that the preacher is truly filled with the Spirit. Members of a congregation are gratified whenever their own pastor is so honored. By the same token church members look forward to hearing outstanding preachers during this annual emphasis. One tangible result of revival meetings is a directly related increase in giving. During the spring 2008 spring revival meeting in one church in Jeonju, the equivalent of some \$30,000.00 was collected from special offerings taken. The annual revival is also a time of spiritual renewal and this is when many church members volunteer for such activities as teaching Sunday school, working with the youth fellowship, involvement in the women's and men's fellowships, and serving on various church committees.

Not all Korean preaching, however, is in the revivalist tradition. In 2007 I attended a church in a small rural village where the pastor preached a sermon which was immediately followed by an adult Sunday school class based on the sermon text. What was unusual is that the Sunday school class consisted of the entire congregation and the class was an extension of the sermon. This two-hour worship service seemed to work well and everyone appeared interested and attentive. Just to keep things livened up a bit the pastor would occasionally say "hallelujah" and the congregation would respond with a hearty "amen." The congregation also read each

verse of the scripture passage in unison prior to the pastor's exposition of the verse. Occasionally the pastor would ask questions directed to specific groups such as the elders, the deacons, and the women's and men's fellowships. While the authority of this particular pastor did not derive from the shamanistic spiritual tradition, it was clear that it did come from the Confucian teaching tradition.

As I reflect upon Korean preaching it becomes increasingly clear that there is a dialogical relationship between the Confucian and shamanistic traditions in determining not only the authority of the pastor, but also the style of preaching. It is also clear that while most preaching is conservative and focuses on personal spiritual growth and biblical exposition, exceptions to this are occasionally made in sermons dealing with issues of social concern. When this happens, the members of the congregation are called to action which is, by American standards at least, sometimes quite radical. Perhaps this too is a kind of revivalistic preaching with a social focus rather than a personal one.

5. Contemporary Challenges to Korean Preaching

Although there are undoubtedly many contemporary challenges to Korean preaching I mention only two. The first of these is the digital revolution. As more churches install state of the art media systems fewer people are carrying their Bibles and hymnbooks with them to worship services, for the hymns and scripture texts are projected on a large screen. Will this bring an end to the open Bibles which are carefully read and underlined while the pastor preaches? Will this signify a step backward from full involvement in the sermon? Only time will tell, but this has resulted in more showmanship on the part of some pastors as they seek to be entertaining in order to fit into the media high tech surrounding them as well as hold the congregation's attention.

As for university chapel services, where attendance is required, many students totally ignore the preaching of the Word in favor of their own digital environment be it an MP3, a cell phone, a hand held computer, or a wireless movie screen. Even in church on Sunday mornings one can occasionally see people crouching low in the pew as they answer their cell phones while the pastor is preaching. It is obvious that the pastors today have digital competition while preaching.

A second contemporary challenge to Korean preaching is that the institutional church is becoming less central to many people's lives than in the past. As Jong Sung Rhee points out Korean Christianity is "institutional church-centered."¹⁴ With the rise in the standard of living and the move to a western-style five-day work week, people now have both leisure time and the disposable income to enjoy it. Weekends present many options other than church attendance and missing regular worship services is not viewed by many with the same disfavor as in the past. Thus, the opportunities for the pastor to reach people through preaching are diminished.

While there are well-known preachers who use radio and television to get their message across, Korea has not seen the rise of nationally known televangelists such as those found in the United States. Absence from church services therefore means that one does not hear the pastor preaching. This has become a challenge to the churches, and pastors are seeking ways to once again make the institutional church the center of Christian life.

For the present, however, Korean pastors and their preaching occupy a position in both church and society that would be the envy of most American pastors. This is a significant difference from preaching in the western context. What holds promise for the American church, however, is that immigrant Korean pastors are bringing this difference with them as they seek to be faithful to their cultural heritage in their newly adopted land.

Abstract

Title: Korean Preaching from a Western Perspective

Rev. Daniel J. Adams, Ph.D.

Preaching is central to the worship life of the Korean church in a way that is different from that in western countries. The Korean pastor has considerable authority which derives from the Confucian hierarchical social structure and the shamanistic focus on being a spiritual person. Korean sermons are theologically conservative even while the life of pastors involves struggle

with the Korean people and their aspirations. Korean sermons are also biblically based and the hearers are expected to act on the basis of the demands of the texts, even when this results in radical social action. Korean sermons are revivalistic, thus demonstrating the spirituality of the pastor. Future challenges to Korean preaching include the digital revolution and the loss of the centrality of the institutional church in lives of many people.

Key Words: preaching, authority, Confucian, shamanistic, conservative, biblical, social action, revivalistic.

¹ See Chung ChangBok, *Preaching for Preachers: A Study of Preaching with Particular Reference to the Korean Cultural Context* (Seoul: Worship & Preaching Academy, 1999), where he asserts on pp. 3-4 that “the communication of the Gospel in the pulpit is indisputably the single most important ministry in Korean Protestant churches.”

² Lee Jung Young, *Korean Preaching: An Interpretation* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1997), 92-95.

³ Kang Shin-Myung, “The Dignity of Korean Pastors,” *Korean Church Growth Explosion*, ed. Bong Rin Ro & Marlin L. Nelson (Seoul: Word of Life Press and Taichung, Taiwan: Asia Theological Association, 1983), 305.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 305.

⁵ Lee, *Korean Preaching: An Interpretation*, 100-101.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ Paul S. Crane, *Korea Patterns*, illustrated by Sandra Mattielli, fourth edition, revised, (Seoul: Royal Asiatic Society, Korea Branch and Kwangjin Publishing Co., 1978), 138.

⁸ Jung Sung Rhee, “Types of Church Leaders Today: A Brief Sketch of the Church Leaders After the Korean War,” *Korea Struggles for Christ: Memorial Symposium for the Eightieth Anniversary of Protestantism in Korea*, ed. Harold S. Hong, Won Yong Ji & Chung Choon Kim (Seoul: Christian Literature Society of Korea, 1966), 140.

⁹ Kim Chong Bum, “Preaching the Apocalypse in Colonial Korea: The Protestant Millennialism of Kil Son-ju,” *Christianity in Korea*, ed. Robert E. Buswell, Jr. & Timothy S. Lee (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2006), 149-166.

¹⁰ See Kim In Soo, “A Study on the Pastor Kil, Sun-Ju’s Spirit of ‘Country Love’—One Attempt at Reinterpretation of His Theology and Thought,” *Korean Presbyterian Journal of Theology*, Vol. 1, No.1(2001):97-127.

¹¹ Chu Ki Chol, “‘My Five-Fold Prayer’—The Last Testament of the Rev. Chu Ki Chol, Martyr During the Japanese Occupation of Korea,” *Testimonies of Faith in Korea*, ed. Sang Chang, David K. S. Suh, Keun Won Park & Yong-Bock Kim [Document No. 15] (Geneva: World Alliance of Reformed Churches, 1989), 94-98.

¹² Allen D. Clark, *A History of the Church in Korea*, revised edition (Seoul: Christian Literature Society of Korea, 1971), 475.

¹³ Chung ChangBok, “Common Elements in Theology and Preaching,” *Korea Journal of Theology*, Vol. (1995):500.

¹⁴ Rhee, “Types of Church Leaders Today,” *Korea Struggles for Christ*, 140-141.