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Korean Preachers & Worship Leaders

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Won-Yong Kang 강원용

1917-2008

Keedai Kim

Abstract

Reverend Kang Won Yong is most known for his work in ecumenical and interfaith dialogue. His initiatives have earned him awards from organizations for the unity and reconciliation that he sought. However, Reverend Yong's liturgy of preaching and worship should not be so easily overlooked. Although it has been a few years since his death, his legacy lives on through the church that he founded and the ideals he left behind.

Introduction

Reverend Kang Won Yong was born in 1917 in the South Hamkyong Province, which is now a region of North Korea. He is the founding pastor of Kyung Dong Presbyterian Church in Seoul in 1945, which was later referred to as “the seedbed of the Presbyterian Church in the Republic of Korea.”¹ Kyung Dong Presbyterian Church is often seen as “the starting point for the spread of the Presbyterian Church within South Korea.”²

Preaching and Worship

It might be argued that Reverend Kang’s theology of preaching and worship was influenced by the social and political climate of his time. The military 5.16 coup d'état led by Major General Park Chung-Hee in particular might have shaped his thinking, as “Kyung Dong Church appeared devoted to the prophetic tradition of the Old Testament, the contextualization of ecumenical movement, freedom by the gospel and realization of justice and shalom”³ immediately following the military aggression. This in turn brought

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¹ “Reverend Won Yong Kang” by Hyunsook Kim, Yonsei University Class Notes, 2006

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.



on persecution against the church. Reverend Kang defended his church by attempting to theologize their opinions. Kyung Dong Church in particular was marked by the three words “didache, koinonia, and diakonia”. It sought to systematize educational training, strengthen the fellowship of believers, and be a serving church.

Reverend Kang’s worship was similar to his preaching in that much of it was influenced by – or seeking to influence – the society at large. He focused in on contextualizing the worship and encouraged the congregation to attend Thanksgiving worship on Chuseok. The church also held festivals and plays four or five times a year.

Ecumenism and Inter-Faith Dialogue

Reverend Kang is most well known for his work as a pioneer of the ecumenical movement in Korea.⁴ He was the director and president of the Korean Christian Academy, which helped to further the ecumenical ethos among young Korean Christians. The Academy structured many inter-faith dialogues with leaders of South Korea’s six leading religions. The content of these dialogues included reconciliation in divided Korea. Reverend Kang also championed the rights of the disenfranchised in Asia, giving them a voice.

For his work in ecumenism and inter-faith relations, Reverend Kang received the 17th Niwano Peace Prize. There were many reasons for giving him this award including his “deep concern for social justice in South Korea.”⁵ His concern for “the unification of North and South Korea, reconciliation in labor disputes, freedom of speech, and educational programs for women and laborers”⁶ also led to this endowment.

The Worship Service of Kyung Dong Presbyterian Church

The rest of this study will look at a typical Sunday service at Kyung Dong Presbyterian Church. The so-called “high church” characterizes the worship of Kyung Dong Presbyterian Church. One thing that strikes you immediately as you observe the

⁴ World Council of Churches, “Tribute to Rev. Dr. Kang Won Yong,” World Council of Churches, <http://www.oikoumene.org/en/resources/documents/general-secretary/tributes/tribute-to-rev-dr-kang-won-yong.html> (accessed Nov. 28, 2005).

⁵ Niwano Peace Foundation, “Why Dr. Kang Won Yong Was Selected for the Niwano Peace Prize,” Niwano Peace Foundation, http://www.npf.or.jp/peace_prize/f/17/reason_e.pdf (accessed Nov. 28, 2005).

⁶ Ibid.

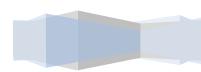
service is its grand yet subdued ambience (yes I know this is oxymoronic). It is grand in its architecture with its high ceiling, large cross directly behind the pulpit, and the organ with its long pipes running up alongside the cross. Yet it is still subdued in its simplicity. There are no LCD projectors or TV screens to mar the walls or distract the Christian from the main purpose of worship. There are floral arrangements and trees, yet they do not detract from the “high churchness” that is conveyed. Even on video you can sense a certain level of awe and wonder. But it is not pretentious nor is it overbearing.

The liturgy itself is fairly long yet expertly executed. The service starts off with hymn #40. So far the service starts off in a typical manner. The call to worship is given from Psalm 96:1-3 with the congregation responding to the presider. It is only when the choir sings next that you are reminded that this is indeed high church. The song is not quite gothic yet it has a feel to it that is not also quite Korean. The lyrics are in Korean yet the style of the song transports the listener to a medieval European era. It is both enchanting and soothing at the same time.

The service continues with yet another responsive reading from Psalm 24. The repetition of certain parts of the liturgy is a trend that we continue to see throughout the service. Hymn #102 is sung followed by the first of several scripture readings, the first from Zechariah 9:9-10, 16-17. Another hymn is sung this time from #27. Only this time this hymn is divided up into three verses and each verse is sung in between other portions of the liturgy. So the first verse is sung, followed by the second scripture reading of Romans 13:10-14, the second verse is sung, followed by the reading of Luke 1:67-79, and this discourse is concluded with the singing of the third and final verse of hymn #27.

The original presider returns and leads the congregation in what looks like a prayer taken from a prayer book; the whole church participates in its reading. The church then sings the first verse of hymn #28, reads yet another portion of scripture in Isaiah 42:3, and finishes this section with the singing of hymn #391. One of the elders them comes forward and prays what is typically seen as the “long prayer” before the sermon is given (and it is long indeed). The choir sings another song in typical high church fashion which yet again is reminiscent of some gothic/European sentiment.

Reverend Park Jong Hwa then comes forward and delivers the sermon and the sermon is quite peculiar indeed. With the kind of liturgy that we have seen thus far I was



expecting a sermon to be quite long and perhaps even grandiose yet it was understated and quite short. In fact I timed the sermon to be exactly 15 minutes and 30 seconds which I would say is very short for a Korean church.

The pastor prays to end the sermon and the ushers come forward at the beginning of the offering song (hymn #289) and collect the offering from the congregation. The pastor receives the offering baskets and places them on the table in the very front (or back depending on how you look at it) of the stage. The service ends with the offering prayer, hymn #635 which is the Lord's Prayer, and the benediction given by Reverend Park.

Something I found quite fascinating was the garb of those leading the service. Typically the only ones who are wearing special clothing are the pastor, the choir, and maybe the offering ushers. In this service, anybody who had anything to do with something up front was wearing a purple robe of some sort. This was the unifying characteristic of everyone from the choir to the pastor; they were all wearing purple. The pastor was separated from the other leaders in that in addition to the purple garb he was wearing a black sash with writing on it, but other than that they were all the same.

Another thing that was amazing was the smoothness of the service itself. It seemed quite involved and complicated yet things moved along without a hitch. I am so used to services with long pauses because of the adjustment of a microphone or the movement of the pastor from the lower pulpit to the top pulpit or some kind of mechanical failure, but even though it was a complicated liturgy it was executed with perfection. There were no interruptions, hiccups, and the transitions were very smooth.

Resources:

“Reverend Won Yong Kang” by Hyunsook Kim

“Why Dr. Kang Won Yong Was Selected for the Niwano Peace Prize.” Niwano Peace Foundation, www.npf.or.jp/peace_prize_f/17/reason_e.pdf (Nov. 28, 2005)

“Tribute to Rev. Dr. Kang Won Yong.” World Council of Churches, www.oikoumene.org/en/resources/documents/general-secretary/tributes/tribute-to-rev-dr-kang-won-yong.html (accessed Nov. 28, 2005).

Worship Service:

http://www.kdchurch.or.kr/html_worship/worship_home.asp?ws=%C1%D6%C0%CF%BF%B9%B9%E8&seq=1656&from=home_week&f_name=mms://db.kdchurch.or.kr/kd_worshipvod/20091129bt.wmv