

The Church in Korea: Persecution and Subsequent Growth

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Abstract

Persecution of Christians in Korea, like that of Christians in ancient Rome, reveals that Christian teaching clashes with surrounding cultures. A survey of the persecutions of Christians in Korea in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries (first of Catholic Christians, then by Japanese, and finally under communism) reveals both political and religious factors. Yet, recalling Tertullian, the author reminds us that persecution is seen to result in the growth, purification, and strengthening of the church. Finally, the author recalls the amazing church growth in Korean history and concludes with a warning about the danger faced by the church in the context of economic prosperity.

Church history is a history of persecution. Each Christian church, at any time and in every place, has had to face persecution.¹ In the beginning of the church, the Romans persecuted her because of the suspicion provoked among the Roman authorities. In other words, the Christian way of life looked different from the way of life dictated by Roman customs. That was apparent from the first resistance Paul faced in Philippi in his second missionary journey.

¹ William Bramley-Moore writes, “The history of Christian martyrdom is, in fact, the history of Christianity itself,” in *The New Encyclopedia of Christian Martyrs*, compiled by Mark Water (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2001), ix.

When Paul and his companions had healed a slave girl who was possessed by an evil spirit, the owners, realizing that their hope of making money was gone, accused them of “advocating customs unlawful for us Romans to accept or practice” (Acts 16:21). Though it was about twenty years before Nero’s imperial persecution, it revealed the cultural nature of persecution the Christians faced from the beginning. Christian teaching and Roman customs were opposed to each other both politically and socially. That was the same situation for the Early Korean Church.

In the early Korean Church, Christian teaching was both strange and unlawful for most Koreans imbued with common Confucian values; thus, they considered Christian teaching *barbaros philosophia*.² For the Koreans, Christianity was above all not oriental, but an *externa religio* and *superstitio*. From that point of view, their understanding of Christianity was the same as that of the Romans.

I. The Korean Church under Persecution

In 1784, Roman Catholicism, whose adherents were called *Chosen* at that time, was first introduced to Korea. The Korean Catholic Church suffered five major persecutions in 1791, 1801, 1839, 1846, and 1866. About ten thousand Korean Roman Catholics were executed during those persecutions. For the Korean authorities, the Catholic Church was only an ideological enemy invading their land from outside, and thus an unlawful religion, *religio illicita*. In a manner of speaking, the Korean Catholic Church, as the Goa in India, provoked persecution by engaging in political matters. In short, persecution against Catholics was a political suppression. Korean Protestantism, however, met a somewhat different situation in the late nineteenth century, about a hundred years after the first introduction of Roman Catholicism. At the time, the political concern of the Korean government was different. Still, there was a conflict of values, that is, a collision between the gospel and the Confucian value-system. The early Korean Protestants had to endure struggles among family members, specifically in regard to *jesa*, the ceremonies of ancestor worship.

After 1900, however, especially after the Annexation of 1910, the political suppression of Christianity by the Japanese authorities was resumed. This time, however, its subject was different. While the Roman Catholics had

² Regarding the concept and history of *barbaros philosophia*, see Guy G. Stroumsa, *Barbarian Philosophy: The Religious Revolution of Early Christianity*, WUNT 112 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1999), 57–84.

been persecuted by the Korean government, the Protestants were persecuted by the Japanese Imperialists. Fearing the interference of colonial policies by the Western churches, the Imperialists adopted a dual strategy against Christianity: divide-and-control, aiming at disjoining and limiting it: one part of this dual strategy was for its dispersion, the other, for its attenuation. In 1910, the year of the Annexation by the Japanese, the government of the latter calculated there were about 200,000 Christians, 300 Christian schools, 30,000 scholars, 1,900 meeting places, 270 foreign missionaries, and 2,300 Korean ministers working actively.³ The foreign missionaries were connected, either directly or indirectly, to the outer world. The Protestant churches enjoyed a good reputation among Korean people through either establishing schools and hospitals, or enlightening their spirits, such as by contributing to progress through reform of the social system, creating more class equality and supporting the emancipation of women. They had won public trust through various cultural and enlightening activities for the oppressed people. So, the Japanese authorities tried to crush the church.

The first persecution took place in the case of Haeseo Educational Coalition. As the *Seobuk* (North-West) provinces had many Christians, the church leaders of the Seocheon, Chungju, and Anak districts had proclaimed the “One church for one *Myeon* (municipal community)” movement and formed the Educational Coalition to educate their people. The Japanese government maliciously misrepresented the movement, arrested all the leaders involved, and accused them of being supporters of fundraising for the Korea Independence Army.

In December 1910, there was a more acute persecution called the Conspiracy Case. A missionary named G. S. McCune came to shake hands with Terauchi Masatake (1852–1919), the Governor General. The authorities again made this a pretext for opposition to the church, arrested over 600 people, and pronounced 105 of them guilty, for the purpose of suppressing the Christian national independence movement. In the process, Methodist pastor Chun Deogki and two laymen, Kim Geunhyung and Chung Heesoon, were tortured to death. National leaders such as Rhee Syngman and Ahn Changho fled to America, and Kim Kyoosik was exiled to China.

The 1919 Independence Movement, called the March 1st Movement, was another occasion for suppression. This was an anti-Japanese independence movement joined by over 10% of the total Korean population. While the number of Christians at that time was estimated to be about 1.5% of the population, the Christian church contributed about 25–30% of preparatory

³ Wi Jo Kang, *Politics and Religion under the Japanese Rule* (Seoul: CLC, 1977), 28.

actions by preparing and mobilizing the uprising. Among the 33 Korean leaders who signed the Declaration document sent to the Governor General, 16 were Christians. After that, greater oppression of the Protestant churches followed. From March to April 1919, 41 churches were destroyed and 2,120 Christians were jailed. According to a report submitted to the 1919 Presbyterian General Assembly, 3,804 Christians were arrested, including 134 pastors and elders. After the movement, the Japanese government tightened its control and suppression of the Korean churches.

One of the worst persecutions of Korean Christianity was related to the enforced Shinto shrine worship and the subsequent persecution of the churches for their disobedience. The Shinto shrine was a place to perform worship in Shintoism, the native Japanese national religion serving both the sun goddess and other gods, allegedly the ancestors of the royal dynasty, in addition to the emperor as the present god. The Japanese wartime government felt it necessary to unite the national spirit by enforcing its military policies. Shinto shrine enforcement was a part of the National Spiritual Mobilization Movement. The building of Shinto shrines started when the Japanese people entered Korea. Specifically, after the erection of the Chosen Jingung, the principal shrine of Korean Shintoism, on the peak of Namsan in Seoul in 1925, many Shinto shrines were erected across the whole peninsula. In 1935, there were 322 shrines; at the time of the National Liberation, the number had reached 1,141.⁴ Beginning in 1935, mission schools were also forced to take part in shrine worship. In the following year, all churches and Christian institutions had to take part in the worship or be closed down. Individuals who refused to take part in shrine worship were denounced as *unpatriotic* and suffered many disadvantages; not only were they expelled from official service, but their children were also banned from schools. Pastors were either forced to resign or ejected from their churches. Nonetheless, the pastors refused to worship the sun goddess on the grounds that it was idolatry, violating the first and the second commandments. While there was general Christian resistance, because of the fear of persecution, some Christians obeyed, and many others, even church institutions and presbyteries, were submissive to the threat by allowing their members' attendance at the shrine ceremony. Roman Catholics (1935) and Methodists (1938) succumbed to the demands. A relatively small denomination, the Holiness Church, was dissolved. At last, even the biggest denomination, the Presbyterian Church, at the 27th General Assembly in 1938, carried the motion affirming that the shrine ceremony was not a religious but a patriotic

⁴ *Bulletin of Chosen, 1925–1945* (n.p.: Office of Chosen Governor General, 1945).

ceremony. It again provoked fierce resistance against Shinto shrine worship. In the process, over 2,000 Christians were put behind bars and over 40 died in prison. Among them was the Rev. Joo Kicheol (1897–1944), a great martyr. He was imprisoned and tortured for five years and seven months, and died on April 21, 1944. Foreign Missions in Korea had to decide whether to close their schools in refusing to obey or to continue obeying the order of shrine ritual. Neglecting the order to engage in the shrine ceremony was a pretext for the Japanese to put an end to Christian education, and it was a way to stop the Korean Christian leaders' call for national independence from the Japanese regime. It made it difficult for the Missions to make a decision. There were naturally pros and cons. At last, the American Presbyterian Church of the North (PCUSA) and the South (PCUS), and the Australian Presbyterian Mission (APM) decided to discontinue their schools. The American missionary G. S. McCune was dismissed from the office as Principal of Soongsil School and expatriated from Korea because of his rejection of shrine worship. Other missionaries, such as Bruce Hunt (PCUSA) and Dr. Charles McLaren (APM) were put in jail. In addition to them, many missionaries refused to obey and supported the cause of their Korean brethren. The Japanese Imperial Government demanded further actions from the Koreans such as the raising of the Japanese flag, the bowing down toward the Japanese Royal Palace, and the recitation of the Japanese subject's vow. Shrine worship continued to be the most acute form of oppression of the Korean Church during the decade until Liberation. There were many acts of betrayal during this period, and the persecution was a phenomenon that touched all classes and constituted the harshest measures of the Japanese regime.

The second persecution the Korean Church suffered was during the rule of the Communist regime after the Liberation from Japanese occupation in 1945. Though there had been communist persecutions before the Liberation, after the establishment of the Communist government in North Korea, the persecution had become even stronger and more specifically targeted. The Supreme Leader Kim Il-sung enthroned by Soviet instructions was known to claim, "Without dealing with the Christians, there can be no communization of Korea."⁵ The national leader and Presbyterian elder, Cho Mansik, was the first to be arrested by the Communist government. At the time of the Liberation, the North Korean population was estimated at

⁵ Heungsoo Kim, ed., *History of North Korean Church after Liberation* (Seoul: Dasan Geulbang, 1992), 17.

about 9.4 million, including 300,000 to 350,000 Christians.⁶ Kang Yangook (1904–1983), the maternal uncle of Kim, although he was an ordained minister, led the Communist persecution. The persecution began with the interruption of the Samil Independent Movement Memorial Service on March 1, 1946. Sixty pastors were arrested. Rev. Kim Injoon was tortured to death; others were known to have been banished and condemned to hard labor and later died at the Aoji Coal Mine. The Communist government enforced a Sunday election on November 3, 1946 in order to paralyze the Christians and eliminate opposing churches. Subsequently, they prevented worship services and monitored the sermons of pastors. They frequently requested political speeches supporting both the Communist regime and Kim's policy from the churches, which naturally resulted in the imprisonment of pastors and others. Realizing that mere suppression could not get full control over the Christians, Kim formed a governmental organization named "The Chosen Christian Federation," appointing his uncle Kang as the chief representative of the Federation, and aimed to make divisions among and weakening of North Korean Churches. Pastors Kim Jinsoo, Kim Whasik, Kim Injoon, and many others were arrested and martyred for their refusal to participate in North Korea's propaganda, and what became of many people is still unknown. Eventually, the North Korean Church was completely abolished. Now there are just two known churches according to the Communist propaganda.

The North Korean Christians recognized that Christianity and Communism were never compatible and that there were but three options: compromising with the Communists, dying as martyrs, or defecting from the North to the South. To live in the North with Christian identity had simply been impossible. That is why one third of North Korean Christians, about 70,000 to 80,000 people, defected to the South before the Korean War. The Christian anti-Communism was learnt from the North Korean Communist regime.

The third persecution the Korean Church suffered was during the Korean War. Since the Liberation, Korea had been divided, South and North, both politically and militarily. On June 25, 1950 the North invaded the South. From that day until July 27, 1953, during just over three years, 2,710,000 soldiers (South Koreans, United Nations, North Koreans, or Chinese) were killed. The North Korean forces, when they marched through the South, defined Christians as an anti-revolutionary, pro-American group

⁶ Regarding Korean Christian population, see Yangsun Kim, *Church History of a Decade after Liberation* (Seoul: Educational Department of the PCROK, 1956), 68, 291.

that had to be killed or deported. They burned and destroyed church buildings. Many pastors who remained in their congregations so as not to forsake their sheep were caught and massacred in the name of People's Revolutionary Tribunals. More than 9,000 people were killed merely because of the name Christian. One of the most outstanding martyrs of the period was Pastor Son Yangwon (1902–1950), known as the “Atomic Bomb of Love.” It was estimated that over 10,000 Korean Christians were killed because of their faith. That number exceeded that of the martyrs of the Roman persecution.⁷

II. *The Meaning of Persecution*

Tertullian is known for the classic definition of the persecution against Christianity and its paradoxical result: “You will continue frantically ... to kill us, torture us, and persecute us ... but the more you kill us, the more we increase, *semen est sanguis christianorum* (the blood of the martyrs is the seed of the Church).”⁸ That indicates that the blood of Christians is the basis of the growth of the church, which has been demonstrated over and over again in church history. Martyrdom in English is originally taken from *martyrium* in Latin and its Greek equivalent *martyrion*, which means “witness.” Thus, *martyrium* meant both witness and martyr. It suggests that witnessing the gospel is accompanied by both passion and pain. Historically speaking, persecution brought about three positive results. The first is the spreading of the gospel. One typical case was the martyrdom of Stephen, which brought about the spreading of the gospel (Acts 8:1, 4). Because of his martyrdom, the Jerusalem-centered Christians were scattered and spread the gospel to Samaria (Acts 8:5), Gaza (8:26), Phoenicia, Cyprus, and Antioch (11:19). The same process happened in the early Korean church. The early persecution period brought about various transitions for Korean Christians and eventually the spread of the gospel. The second is the purification of the church. Much like the rice-Christians of China, Korean churchgoers came into the church for extra-gospel purposes. Some attended the church to get

⁷ It is difficult to count numbers of martyrs in the Roman Empire. W. H. C. Frend, a well known scholar of Roman persecution and martyrs, argues that the number of martyrs of that period “would be not several thousand but several hundred.” W. H. C. Frend, *Martyrdom and Persecutions in the Early Church: A Study of a Conflict from the Maccabees to Donatus* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1965), 413. Though Tacitus wrote in his *Annals* that Nero slaughtered a huge multitude (*ingens multitudo*) of Christians, Marta Sordi interprets that phrase as a literary expression denoting several hundred victims in order to emphasize the severe atmosphere of that period. Thus Frend sees the number of Christian martyrs in the Roman Empire would be no more than a thousand, that is, several hundred.

⁸ Tertullian, *Apology* 50.12–13 (<http://www.tertullian.org/quotes.htm>).

relief supplies; others regarded the church as a safe base for their independence activities. With the persecution, however, those with impure motives left the church. It made the church pure, standing on faith alone. The third is the establishment of a steadfast and combatant church. Beset by severe persecution and the struggles of a life-or-death situation, the early Korean church became a spiritually strong and militant church confronting persecutions with united power. The power of faith was the basis for church planting. Korean churches both kept their faith steadfast in persecutions and endured outside pressures undauntedly. In short, the persecution resulted in the inner strengthening of the Korean Church and allowed today's amazing growth.

III. *Growth of the Korean Church*

The church does not grow by chance. In the early period, the Korean Church had not only to struggle with the two basic cultures of Shamanism and Confucianism, but also to endure the ostracizing of anti-foreignism. Since the 1900s, she had suffered both from the Japanese Militarist and the Communist regimes. Nonetheless, the Korean Church outgrew her harsh conditions with unflagging energy and exerted positive influence on all spheres of Korea's society, eventually becoming the most influential religion of Korea. Christopher Dawson, an English Roman Catholic historian, wrote: "One of the criteria of a Christian culture is the degree in which the social way of life is based on the Christian faith."⁹ The Korean society was no doubt transformed gradually by Christian values based on Christian teaching. That was accompanied by the growth of the Korean Church.

The first decade (1884–1894) following the arrival of the Protestant missionaries is described as "years of struggle." At that time, there were only 500 to 600 Christians. But in 1895 the number increased to 2,500, in 1900 it went up to 12,600, in 1910 to 73,180, in 1920 to 92,510, and in 1930 the number increased to 125,479. In the year of Liberation, it was estimated at 350,000–400,000, in 1955 about 600,000, in 1965 about 1.2 million, in 1975 about 3.5 million, and according to the governmental statistics in 1980, the Protestants numbered 7.18 million. Therefore, after 1960, the number doubled every ten years. In the latter half of the 1970s, six churches were planted every day. Numerically speaking, it was reported that the Christian population had increased 600,000 per year. In the 1990s, the Korean Christians reached 11 million, being 23% of the whole population.

⁹ Christopher Dawson, "The Outlook for Christian Culture," in *The Historic Reality of Christian Culture: A Way to the Renewal of Human Life* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1960), 13–30.

What was the most important growth factor of the Korean Church? It is difficult, of course, to pinpoint one factor of church growth. Complicated factors explain the growth of the church. Missionaries often emphasize the efficiency of mission policies. Korean Methodist theologians tend to suggest that the enthusiasm or piety of Korean Christians was the most important factor of the growth. Others argue that the political situation of Korea was the platform of church growth. I myself once pointed out that during this period in Korea the fusion between Christianity and nationalism took place, and resistance against conversion to Christianity had been removed. Every interpretation looks plausible, in its own way. The Korean Church suffered and endured many persecutions and had gone through a path of many difficulties, on the one hand, cultivating confidence in the gospel, and on the other hand, evangelizing with both strenuous belief in the uniqueness of Christ and religious enthusiasm for souls, which was the basis for church revival. The Korean Church is a church that has experienced many persecutions and tribulations, fought against non-Christian or anti-Christian forces, and successfully survived. That steadfast faith was the basis of her amazing growth. According to Eusebius's words, the persecutions and the tribulations were all for the *praeparatio evangelica*; this is also true of the Korean Church.

At present, the Korean Church shows a tendency to decrease. Before the early part of the 1980s, the church grew numerically, but in the late 1980s, it began to decline. The phenomenon is probably connected both to the successful Korean population policy and to the rapid fall of birth rate. But the most influential factor would be the prosperity of the Korean society and the improved quality of life due to amazing economic growth. The reality of rapid socio-economic change has caused reduction of religious enthusiasm and now threatens the future of Korean churches. The warning of Max Weber that both the reception of Christian faith and the growth of the Church are closely related to the social realities of the time sounds so true in this land.