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The Dynamics of Union and Schism in Korean Church History

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Abstract

The history of the Korean Protestant Church began with the acceptance of Christianity brought by missions of various overseas denominations. Despite this, the unique situation of the Korean mission field resulted in the establishment of a unified confession of faith, and a unified theology and direction for participation in society. This was largely made possible due to the political and cultural situation of the Korean people in the modern era. However, the division of Korea, the Korean War, rapid economic development and the changes that occurred as a result helped to provoke serious internal conflict and schisms within the Korean Church. Yet, even though the Korean Church was established through missionary work, it still bears the characteristics of an indigenous church, so that the dynamism of its “context” has significantly shaped its identity, leading to a tradition of unity. Therefore, the challenges of polarization and conflict inside the church can be overcome by looking within the traditional context of union and cooperation to develop a new understanding of ecumenism.

Keywords: Mission ecumenism, mission route, Chejungwon, single Korean Protestant church, polarization

Introduction

From a theological point of view, all history can be said to be contextual in the sense that it can only be understood according to specific geographical and chronological boundaries. Context is relative, but the text itself is universal. In the “context” of the history of Christian missions, the “text” comprises the broad principles of mission work, the message to be spread and the methods for doing so. The historical and geographical “situation,” the “power of the field,” or any other elements that qualify the text and cause it to evolve into completely new forms may be referred to as the “context.”

The power of the context in this sense is evident throughout Korean church history. The premise of this paper is that identifying and analyzing this power may therefore be an effective tool in uncovering the fundamental dynamics in the history of the Korean mission and the church that

developed out of it. The discovery of these dynamics may also aid in the search for solutions to the many problems that the Korean Church faces today.

The “Context” and the “Mission Ecumenism” of Early Protestant Korean Christianity

1) The Tradition of Chejungwon, the First Modern Hospital in Korea

As is well known, the first Protestant missionary to remain in Korea for an extended period of time and explore ways to evangelize the country was Horace N. Allen, a medical missionary appointed to Korea by the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America. He arrived in 1884 and was able to save the life of Min Young-Ik, a high-ranking official who had been seriously injured in the violence of the Coup d’ Etat of 1884. In recognition of this medical service, the Korean state supported the establishment of the Chejungwon (“House of Universal Helpfulness”), which was both the first modern hospital and the first missionary agency in Korea. ⁽¹⁾

As the first Protestant missionary institution in Korea, Chejungwon naturally became an important center for the missionaries who came to Korea after Allen. Although it was formally affiliated to the Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A., Chejungwon help to prepare missionaries from various denominations for the Korean mission field, including Henry G. Appenzeller and William B. Scranton of the Methodist Church, as well as Horace G. Underwood and John W. Heron, who belonged to the same mission board as Allen. ⁽²⁾ They formed a community in Seoul, attending religious services together ⁽³⁾ and holding discussions on how to conduct their evangelizing tasks.

The Korean Protestant mission can, of course, be defined as a mission of denominational churches. This has been a distinctive characteristic throughout Protestant mission history. No one can deny that the sending of missionaries, the establishment of mission stations, the provision of mission expenses and the mission boards that coordinated overseas activities all resulted from initiatives taken by individual denominational churches. ⁽⁴⁾ However, mutual interdependence led to supra-denominational solidarity among missionaries belonging to different denominations and this is clearly illustrated by the Chejungwon, the first Protestant missionary agency in Korea. ⁽⁵⁾ This can be interpreted as the effect of the “context” of the field on the “text,” that is, on the universal modes of missionary activity, including different denominational positions and missionary organizations.

Even after this tradition of the Chejungwon, missionaries in Korea continued to manifest a “team spirit”. H. G. Underwood, the first Presbyterian evangelistic missionary to Korea, actively supported the commencement of Korean missions by the Presbyterian Church in Australia and the Presbyterian Church in the United States. In addition, he directly helped many independent missionaries, including individual missionaries from Canada, providing support until they had firmly established their own missions in Korea. Moreover, the organization of the Council of Missions in Korea and the “Comity Arrangement” that divided Korea into separate areas for different missionary organizations, are also the result of the positive energy that unity gave to the efforts of missionaries representing different

denominational traditions in the Korean mission field. ⁽⁶⁾

2) The Union of Different Mission Routes into Korea

The early mission routes in Korea can be divided into the “Northern Mission Route (NMR)” and the “Southern Mission Route (SMR).” The NMR refers to the mission led by Scottish Presbyterian missionaries John Ross and John MacIntyre, whose work spread from Manchuria into Korea. They made the first translation of the Korean Bible into Korean, sent Korean colporteurs into Korea from the north, and saw the establishment of Sorae Church by Korean converts themselves as the first Protestant church in their native land. The leading colporteur Suh Sang-Ryun went all the way to Seoul and opened a Bible distribution agency which led to many conversions.

The SMR refers to the route taken by Presbyterian and Methodist missionaries from the United States of America who volunteered for the Korean mission and traveled to Korea via Japan. Although they received help from missionaries working in Japan and the early Korean evangelist Lee Soo-Jung and his work on the translation of the Bible, they established their own missions after they came to Korea. The two routes can be characterized by their different principles: the “personal principle” of the NMR and the “territorial principle” of the SMR. In other words, the NMR missionaries concentrated on evangelizing Koreans who could proselytize their compatriots, while the SMR missionaries came to Korea themselves in order to establish a church through their own efforts. ⁽⁷⁾

Many types of conflict could have arisen between these two mission routes. The NMR missionaries came from the United Kingdom and Scotland and their mission strategy emphasized an “indigenous church” with relatively little weight being given to denominational considerations. On the other hand, the SMR missionaries, who came from the United States of America, were guided by the concept of the “missional church,” and therefore followed a mission strategy of transplantation and firm denominationalism. Taken in abstract, at a “text” level, the different backgrounds and expectations seemed bound to lead to disputes and divisions.

However, in the “context” of the actual mission field, the two routes harmonized and integrated. For example, when people who had been converted through the work of the NMR visited H. G. Underwood in Seoul and asked him to baptize them, this did not cause any problems. ⁽⁸⁾ In fact, when Underwood established the first organized Presbyterian Church in Korea with fourteen baptized members at his home on September 27, 1887, two years after his visit to Korea, thirteen of them were believers who had entered the faith through the work of the NMR. ⁽⁹⁾ This church eventually developed into today’s Saemoonan Church, whose origin therefore lies in a community of faith established by the two early Korean mission routes working in union.

Underwood, laying bare his heart, regretted somewhat that Christian believers existed in Korea even before his arrival, in spite of the fact that he had the honor of being the first Protestant missionary to Korea. However, he was able to welcome and praise this occurrence with a generous spirit. “While this was a period of wide seed-sowing, at the same time we were permitted to gather in

our first-fruits," ⁽¹⁰⁾ said he, revealing both his ambivalence and broadmindedness.

3) Union of the Bible, Hymnals, and Literary Missions

As was stated above, the NMR mission with the translation of the Bible into Korean. The publication of the "Ross Version" and the use of colporteurs for its distribution were all made possible through assistance from the British and Foreign Bible Society and the National Bible Society of Scotland. The SMR began preparing in Japan for its mission to Korea. Of particular importance was the publication of both the Gospel of Mark in Korean and the "Hyonto Bible," a Chinese character Bible with Korean morphological affixes, by Lee Soo-Jung and Henry Loomis, general director of the American Bible Society.

Of course, the work of the Bible societies increased as Protestant missionaries arrived in Korea and began to produce and distribute translations of the Bible with the official authorization of their missionary headquarters. Unfortunately, because of contemporary circumstances, the different bible societies at times proceeded with independent or even conflicting programs. Although some process was needed, however, the tradition was established in Korea where different Bible programs were integrated into a unified "Korean Bible Society" which bible societies from other countries supported. ⁽¹¹⁾

Meanwhile, Korean hymnals started to be published, starting with the Chanmiga edited by George H. Jones of the Methodist Church in 1892, and the Chanyangga edited by Underwood the following year. Immediately after the publication of these early hymnals on denominational lines, however, there were discussions which developed into a movement for the common use of a unified hymnal. Eventually, Chansyongga was published in 1908 by the Presbyterian and Methodist Church as the first common hymnal for different denominations in Korea. Since then, denominations have both published separate hymnals and cooperated in producing unified versions, depending on the influence of conservative or liberal theology. However, overall, there has been a strong tradition in the Korean Church for a unified hymnal. ⁽¹²⁾

Literary works played a critically important role in the early mission of the Korean Church because of the adoption of Hangul, the Korean alphabet used chiefly by the common people of the time. As a matter of course, the missions of the Presbyterian and Methodist Churches in Korea devoted a great deal of energy to the publication of doctrinal works and periodicals, such as newspapers and magazines.

The first Christian newspaper was the Choson Krisdoin Hoebo, which was published under the English title Korean Christian Advocate by the Methodist Church beginning in 1897. It was followed by Krisdo Sinmun [The Christian News], which was launched by Underwood of the Presbyterian Church, in the same year. Eventually the two newspapers were integrated into Krisdo Sinmun [The Christian News] by the Presbyterian and Methodist Churches in 1905 at the height of mission ecumenism in the Korean Church. English missionary magazines were published separately by different denominations at first until they were unified into The Korea Mission Field (1905-1941) , the

representative missionary magazine of the denominational alliance.⁽¹³⁾ However, what established the tradition of the “team spirit” of different denominations most firmly in the literary mission was the combined foundation of the Korean Religious Tract Society, known today as the Christian Literature Society of Korea. It is evidence of the strength of the tradition of union in the early Korean Church.⁽¹⁴⁾

4) Combination of Education and Medical Programs

In Korea, the Protestant mission utilized what this author has termed the “triangle method,” which called for the establishment of three institutions—a school, a hospital, and a church,—once a mission station was secured.⁽¹⁵⁾ Although most areas in Korea were separately allocated to either the Presbyterian or Methodist Churches according to the Comity Arrangement, large areas such as Seoul and Pyongyang were used by both denominations as missional strongholds, sometimes causing an overlap in mission investments.⁽¹⁶⁾

In addition to this, it was vitally important for the different missions to join hands and cooperate in large programs, such as the establishment of a college and the management of a general hospital. The need for cooperation was felt strongly in other programs as well, including the theological education for ministers, although the two denominations did not want to lose their own theological identity completely. The moves to meet these needs were eventually implemented when “mission ecumenism” reached a peak in Korea, and this led to the joint operation of schools and hospitals. The most salient examples include the organization of the united Christian foundation for the Chosun Christian College (Yonhi College)⁽¹⁷⁾, the joint operation of the Severance Union Medical College and Hospital,⁽¹⁸⁾ and the Pyongyang Union Christian Hospital, a union of the Jejung Hospital of the Presbyterian Church and the Hall Memorial Hospital of the Methodist Church in Pyongyang.⁽¹⁹⁾

The work of the Presbyterian and Methodist Churches was divided between four Presbyterian and two Methodist denominations. For the theological education of future ministers, however, the Methodist Church established the Union Bible Institute in Seoul, which was run jointly by the Methodist Episcopal Church and Southern Methodist Church of the United States of America, while the Presbyterian Church instituted the Pyongyang Presbyterian Theological Seminary in Pyongyang, which was operated jointly by the Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A., the Presbyterian Church in the U.S., and the Presbyterian Churches in Canada and Australia in union. There existed clear theological differences among the denominations, but the common operation of the sensitive theological education programs is truly an outstanding example of emphasizing “context” in the field of the mission in Korea.

5) Plan for the Establishment of a Single Korean Protestant Church

It is clear that the Protestant mission in Korea developed on the basis of denominational churches and that the early missionaries had relatively strong denominational identities. However, as is often the case, from the point of view of the “indigenous churches” themselves, it was not always easy to

clearly distinguish the differences in faith and theology among the different denominations. This has, in fact, been the common “contextual” experience of missionaries in different areas since early period of the modern mission era. This experience was shared and discussed at missionary meetings, which, as is widely known, pioneered the modern ecumenical movement. Korea, as a place of missions, was no exception. With mission belonging to a variety of denominational churches all at work in narrow missional areas, it was not surprising that this provided a “context” for missionaries to raise the fundamental question of the “transplantation of a denomination.”⁽²⁰⁾ Subsequently, there developed a movement among the early missionaries to establish a non-denominational, “unified church” in Korea.

Even before that time, missionaries in Korea had been increasing the degree of mutual cooperation, primarily through the Union Council of Missions. Finally, on September 11, 1905, all missionaries from the four Presbyterian and two Methodist denominations organized the General Council of Protestant Evangelical Missions in Korea. Article 2 of the regulations of the organization states: “The aim of this Council shall be cooperation in mission efforts, and eventually the organization in Korea of but one native evangelical Church.”⁽²¹⁾

The future unified church was even given a name, “the Korean Christian Church.”⁽²²⁾ An executive committee meeting of January 1906 took note of steps being taken at this time in North America to form what became began the United Church in Canada, and began to review the doctrines which the unified church would adopt. Missionaries in Korea were confident that there would not be any problems in establishing one united church, once the important issue of doctrine had been settled. But in contrast to their unanimous support, disagreement arose from missionary headquarters. The most decisive factor must have been the opposition of the denominationally organized missionary headquarters, as they provided funds that were still vital to the survival of the indigenous churches.

Nonetheless, despite the fact that a single united Protestant church was not established in Korea, the movement had some results. First of all, as was mentioned above, in many areas including education, medical services, and literary works, different denominations and missionary organizations were able to unite to achieve their shared aims; this ended segregation and resolved conflicts among them. Their efforts achieved a partial success when both the Methodists and the Presbyterians were able to form separate united churches based on different missionary organizations, and these churches were able to exist even though the missionary organizations at home were operating independently of each other. In this respect, the unity was the result of the “context power” of the Korean mission field, strengthened by the willingness of many missionaries to be sensitive to the needs of the new context.

6) Realization of a Single Korean Church Separately by the Presbyterian and Methodist Churches

In the case of the Presbyterian Church, as was described above, the mission work of Korean evangelists themselves, supported by the Scottish Presbyterian Church of the NMR, resulted in the establishment of an indigenous church. It is true that the first organized church, the Saemoonan

Church, was established by Underwood from the Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A., but this was only possible because of the combined work of the NMR and the SMR, the translation and distribution of the Bible, and evangelistic efforts of both the missionaries and local evangelists under their influence. After Underwood, the Presbyterian Church in the U.S., Australia, and Canada launched missions in Korea, which led to overlapping Presbyterian missions.

Although there might have been some friendly competition among the different Presbyterian denominations, a relatively stable cooperative atmosphere prevailed, leading to the movement to establish a single unified church. This narrower unity was achieved even though the ideal for a wider unified church that would encompass both Presbyterian and Methodist Churches, failed.⁽²³⁾ The different Presbyterian missionary denominations started to elect Korean elders at major individual churches and implement theological education in alliance with each other quite early. The Korean elders and missionaries from many Presbyterian orders joined hands and organized the first Korean Presbyterian Council in September 1901, this was the first step in the formation of the One Presbytery in 1907, when the first graduates were produced from the Pyongyang Union Theological Seminary and ordained as ministers in the name of the single Korean Presbyterian Church. At this time, there were as many as 47 Korean elders and 160 helpers.⁽²⁴⁾ They then organized regional representative agencies which were turned into seven presbyteries in 1912. This was at the time of the first General Assembly of the single Presbyterian Church in Korea, which was organized through a meeting held at the auditorium of the Pyongyang Seminary from September 1 to 4, 1912 96 ministers, including missionaries as well as 125 elders, became the first commissioners to the unified General Assembly. Underwood was nominated to become the first President of the General Assembly and Rev. Kil Sun-Joo was appointed as Vice President.⁽²⁵⁾

This achievement of becoming a representative organization occurred almost 30 years after the beginning of the Korean Presbyterian mission—a truly significant development for the Korean Church by any measure. The numerous circumstantial elements which contributed to the process of establishing this one Presbyterian Church can also be seen as examples of “contextual power.” While the direct impetus for the establishment of a unified Presbyterian was “mission ecumenism,” the energy generated by the Great Revival Movement from 1903 to 1910 had a vitalizing effect that also worked as a driving force behind the alliance. The revival was ignited at a Bible Training Class for missionaries in Wonsan in 1903, reached a climax with the Pyongyang Great Revival Movement in 1907, and led to the Save One Million Souls Movement in 1910. It functioned as a large-scale movement for union because it encompassed all the missionaries and believers of every missionary denomination across the nation.⁽²⁶⁾

By contrast, the Northern and Southern branches of the American Methodist Church carried out missionary work separately, and there was therefore a strong inherent possibility that their separate identities would be maintained. It is true that, from the beginning, allied activities were carried out in many forms by the Presbyterian and Methodist Churches together or within the Methodist Church.

However, in the case of the Methodist Church, the Korea Mission Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church was launched on June 21, 1905, and the Korea Mission Conference of the Southern Methodist Church began in 1914. They subsequently developed separate Korea Mission Annual Conferences, to which individual local churches were assigned.

These Mission Annual Conferences seemed destined to continue as separate denominations. However, the “context” of the Korean mission field did not allow these divisions to continue. Eventually, the two Methodist organizations actively merged into a single body, the Korean Methodist Church, in 1930. Since this took place at a time when the Methodist Episcopal Church and Southern Methodist Church in the United States of America had not been able to achieve union, it provided a strong impulse for Methodist Churches in the world to pay a stronger attention toward the concept of “one church.” The union of the Korean Methodist Churches can also be evaluated as “contextual power” as the tradition of the Korean Church exercised a strong unifying influence.

The Context of the Schisms in the Korean Church after Korea’s Liberation from Japanese Colonial Rule and the Reactions

1) Ostensible and Real Reasons of the Schisms

Korea’s liberation from Japanese colonial rule in 1945 can be described as an “exodus” in the history of the Korean people, as it led to freedom of faith for the Korean Church. However, major historical events often have both bright and dark sides, and the arrival of freedom led to another major ordeal in Korean history—the division of the land and the disunion of its people. First of all, the division of the Korean peninsula was obviously the most important factor in determining the physical disunion of the Korean Church itself. Moreover, the congregation and resources of the Korean Church at the time were heavily concentrated 7:3 in the North. With the division of Korea, the northern part was occupied by Communists, who were anti-Christian.

Subsequently, numerous Christians in North Korea suffered a great deal and many of them took refuge in the South. The northern and southern churches were severed. On the one hand, the Christians from North Korea and their leaders played a positive role in the revival of Christianity and a medium for union with the Christians in the south. On the other hand, they also became a cause of conflicts and breakups within the South Korean Church.

A discussion on the start of (South) Korean Church history after Korea’s liberation from Japanese colonial rule is not possible without the theme of “division.” When a religious denomination divides, there must be some justifiable reasons. Several causes are often cited for the division of the Korean Church, the first being the relative level of personal piety of church leaders. More specifically speaking, there were the questions of whether they had participated in rituals at Japanese Shinto shrines and whether or not they were engaged in pro-Japanese collaboration and if so, to what degree they were engaged. This issue was the cause of the split of “Kosin” (or Koryo Theological Seminary)

faction from the Presbyterian Church, and the breakup of the Methodist Church into the “Chaegon” (Reconstruction) and “Pokhung” (Revitalization) factions.

The second major cause was the conflict between conservative and liberal theology. Disputes over theology, especially conservative criticism of liberal theologians, were one of the most common causes of church division. A famous example is the dispute at the Chosen Theological Seminary (currently Hanshin University) over Kim Jae-Joon’s ideas

The third cause relates to ideology. This issue was an important factor in the great schism of the Presbyterian Church into the Tonghap (Unity) and Haptong (Union) factions. At issue was the ecumenical camp’s alleged pro-Communist posture. This will be discussed in more detail later, but for now all that needs to be noted is that it was clearly an example of the “ideological division” over whether to agree, or disagree, with the World Council of Churches (WCC) movement in the “context” of the ideologies of left and right. This factor, of course, also played a role in the divisions that took place among other denominations.⁽²⁷⁾

The fourth cause of the division was the involvement and intervention of conservative international Christian organizations, particularly the International Council of Christian Churches (ICCC) . This cause could also be classified as a theological or ideological factor, but still can be categorized separately because a number of divisions took place due to the involvement of the ICCC.

However, a closer examination of the history of the division of the Korean Church after Korea’s liberation from Japanese imperialism and the Korean War reveals that the “context of divisions” was caused by factors far different from the ostensible reasons given for schism. More specifically, it is doubtful whether the secession of the Kosin faction and the early breakup of the Methodist Church were truly caused by the issue of “piety.” In fact, a great deal of evidence can be found that the divisions did not necessarily focus on whether or not Christian leaders had offered obeisance at Japanese Shinto shrines or maintained a pro-Japanese stance toward the end of the Japanese colonial period. Rather, other issues were more strongly at work, such as the regional background of the people involved, personal connections in supporting or opposing particular figures, personal or communal financial interest, and the political leadership or hegemony in and outside a church. After all, what was claimed as the reason for a division was often lost in the process of the division itself, which frequently became a struggle for power according to self-interest and favoritism.

Take, for example, the secession of the “Presbyterian Church in the Republic of Korea” from the “Presbyterian Church in Korea” which was allegedly caused by different theological positions—probably the most justifiable cause of a division of a religious group. Even in this case, it is questionable how important this ostensible cause was to the division.⁽²⁸⁾ The vast chasm between the superficial cause, which in this case would follow under the category of “ideological division,” and the actual cause can be seen in the division between the Tonghap and Haptong factions of the Presbyterian Church and the controversies over allegations of pro-Communism. The assertion that the division was the result of the ecumenical movement being pro-Communist does not hold water.

Moreover, other reasons which were also cited as a cause of the division (for example, the personal problems of President Park Hyung-Ryong of the General Assembly Theological Seminary and the appointment of commissioners to the Kyonggi Presbytery) were more direct causes of the conflicts. Indeed, the real reasons were far from the cited reason that the ecumenical movement was pro-Communism.⁽²⁹⁾ In the history of the division of the Korean Church, it is often the case that the “context” of conflicts exercised a significant influence in determining what were the “superficial” and what were the “real” motives.

2) Formation and Actions of the Unionists

When the Chaegon (Reconstruction) and the Pokhung (Revitalization) factions split the Methodist Church in Korea, the first schism since its establishment, many Methodist lay people, especially leaders of the women’s mission and young Christians, claimed that the division could not be justified and earnestly appealed for reunification. The Methodist Church did manage to reunite, though not simply on account of these appeals. After that, repeated divisions occurred, such as that between the Hohon (Legal General Assembly) and Kaengsin (Reformed) factions. However, the many unionists worked to stop the splits. Of course, it can be said that it was primarily the different governing system (particularly the centralization of church assets) that worked as a brake against schism. This enabled the Presbyterians to avoid the level of divisions suffered by the Methodist church. However, it still cannot be denied that the context of union worked continuously in the process.

This does not mean that the context of union did not exist within the Presbyterian Church as well. In fact, whenever a division took place, efforts were made and opinions were expressed in attempts to bring the separated groups together and these sometimes ended in partial success. For example, after the separation of the Tonghap faction from the Haptong, the existing Kosin and Haptong factions, which shared considerable similarities in theology, were dramatically united. It is true that both factions had members who were opposed to the reunion. As things turned out, they themselves broke away.⁽³⁰⁾ However, the strength of the unifying energy which was ceaselessly at work in these proceedings clearly possesses significant historical meaning. Therefore, defining the history of the Korean Church after the 1945 liberation of Korea simply as a history of divisions and conflicts would not be accurate. It should be recognized that the “contextual power” which suffuses Korean Church history was still working even at the height of schisms as a dynamic drive for union.

3) Course of the Ecumenical Movement

As is generally known, the modern ecumenical movement has its origin in the “context” of the mission field throughout the history of the modern mission. At the International Mission Council (IMC) gatherings, questions were raised both directly and indirectly about what the barriers among different denominations would continue to mean in the mission field. These questions eventually led to the formation of a stream of mission theology from which arose the idea of establishing a “single

mission church” or “single indigenous church.” However, the movement can be said to have taken shape most earnestly after the foundation of the WCC in 1948. As a mission field, Korea also played a certain role in charting the direction of the modern ecumenical movement, participating in the WCC from the very beginning as a new church in an independent country. Nobody predicted at the time that the WCC would become an Achilles’ heel for the Korean Church.

On the front lines of the Cold War, Korea suffered national division in 1945 and the Korean War, a war of ideology unprecedented in its history, in 1950. As a result, Korea became a place where left and right were in constant ideological confrontation. Under these circumstances, the inclusion of churches in the Communist bloc among the members of the WCC, the pivotal force of the modern ecumenical movement, became an important issue. Some held that the presence of these churches made the WCC a pro-Communist organization. Therefore, according to their argument, if Korean churches joined the WCC, they could not escape from controversies over the ideological implications of their membership in such an organization.

The argument, however, was based largely on misunderstanding. The opponents of the WCC suspected that, due to its ideological neutrality, the organization had not sided explicitly with South Korea during the Korean War and had even supported North Korea’s claim that it was South Korea that had started the war. Yet recent studies utilizing the WCC’s own documents have found that when the Korean War broke out, the WCC adopted a statement demanding that the North Korean army pull out of South Korea and that the situation be restored to what it was before the war began. This is especially significant because it was one of the first such statements by an international organization, predating even that of the U.N.⁽³¹⁾

In this way, the modern ecumenical movement centered on the WCC haplessly ended up as a divisive force in Korea which led to the division of the church through the split of the “ecumenicists” and “evangelists” on theological and ideological lines before it could achieve any meaningful results. In other words, the WCC movement, which signified the overcoming of divisions and mutual reconciliation and cooperation, ended up creating a “context” that was in direct opposition to these goals. Unfortunately this led to ecumenism in Korea being treated as a monopoly of liberal theologians and, in extreme cases, as a source of energy for participation in social movements. The characterization was reinforced as Korean dissident political groups in agreement with the WCC line became central figures in the democratization movements of the 1970s.⁽³²⁾ To summarize, the modern ecumenical movement in Korea worked as an essential program for liberal, participatory theology rather than as energy for cooperation, the reconciliation and union of the Church, and the abolishment of inter-denominational barriers.

At this juncture, we need to take some note of the generally recognized concept of ecumenism and how it has changed. The common sense understanding of ecumenism is typically characterized by a powerful image of a church union movement which aims at finding common ground among different churches and communities and uniting theological understandings and organizations based

on these commonalities. However, this is merely an idealized image of the movement. The complete union and unity it envisages typically only remains an unrealized ideal and impractical slogan. That is why the word ecumenism needs to be understood in a different way. That is, it is necessary to alter the concept and purpose of ecumenism to mean an effort to identify differences and points of disagreement, mutually respect and understand them, and then use this foundation of mutual respect to pursue cooperation and solidarity wherever possible. Such a change of understanding would certainly be relevant to the Korean Church, where ecumenism has been a cause of division and conflict in contradiction of its original spirit.

At any rate, the ecumenical movement of the Korean Church after liberation from Japanese colonial rule progressed mainly within the liberal camp and put a greater emphasis on social movements than on the reconciliation and unity of the Church. Needless to say, it cannot be denied that important programs of the ecumenical movement also include the articulation of church positions on social problems and global issues, such as peace and the preservation of the order of creation, as well as cooperation among denominations and faith communities. For a certain period of time in Korea, the movement concentrated on political democratization with considerable achievements.

The active social participation by the liberals attracted great attention from churches around the world and, eventually, conservative theologians and churches began to reflect on this issue. As a result, their interest and efforts found expression outside the WCC movement at the Chicago Conference in 1973 and, finally, at the Lausanne Covenant which was adopted at the first International Congress on World Evangelization in 1974. Leading conservative evangelists in the Korean Church actively participated in the Covenant, which led to the Seoul Declaration on the Christian Mission in 1975, an expression of interest in social responsibility by both “ecumenicists” and “evangelists.” These developments represented another “context” of the Korean Church.

A Diagnosis of the Polarization of the Korean Church

1) Polarization of Growth and Alienation

Though it is difficult to present exact statistics, Korea undoubtedly has both the church with the world’s biggest congregation and the largest national church in terms of membership in the case of several Protestant denominations. Similarly, the number of believers and Sunday services offered, the scale of programs, the financial resources, the size of church buildings, and the living standards of clergy, are some of the highest in the world even after the first decade of the twenty-first century, a time when a decline in Protestant Christianity in Korea is attracting attention.

It is true that the rapid growth of a small number of large churches and their continued development have played a central role in driving the quantitative growth of the Korean Church and this contributed to Korean Christianity becoming one of the largest mainstream religions. This process has also expanded its social influence and made it a leader on the international religious

stage. It is worthy of notice that the rapid growth of the Korean Church, and the success stories of some large churches in particular, bear a close parallel to Korea's rapid economic development. From the late 1960s through the 1970s and 1980s, Korea's economy developed spectacularly. The military regime's economic development-comes-first national strategy, which is often termed "developmental dictatorship," enabled Korea to swiftly escape from the poverty of traditional Korean society and the overall destitution the people faced after the division of the Korean peninsula and the Korean War. This achievement fulfilled the hopes the Korean people have held throughout their history and, at the same time, is a model which numerous underdeveloped countries could follow.

However, as can often be witnessed in history, brilliant achievements always cast a long, dark shadow. Korea's spectacular economic success created an extremely wide gap between rich and poor and irregularities and encouraged corruption through collusion between politicians and business people. At the moment they overcame absolute poverty, the majority of people had to suffer more frustration and pain from relative poverty and a sense of deprivation and alienation. It was during this period, on the heels of Korea's rapid economic development, that the Korean Church experienced dramatic growth. The Korean Church therefore had the responsibility to heal the polarized Korean society and ease the adverse effects of the country's economic development.

In reality, however, instead of making an attempt to fulfill its social responsibility by helping resolve social conflicts and extreme relative deprivation, the Korean Church jumped on the bandwagon of the drive for growth, contributing to the ill effects produced by capitalism. Because they became involved in collusion between political, business, and religious interests, many churches lost their unique prophetic role.⁽³³⁾ The Korean Church itself could not avoid the biggest problem of a society with a rapid economic growth and the proliferation of chaebol (large business conglomerates), in other words, the drastically wide gap between rich and poor and the economic distribution structure of society. Alongside the world's largest churches and extremely wealthy congregations were numerous poor churches in such dire straits that they could not even provide a minimum standard of living to their clergy. The gap between them was undergirded by a structure so firm as to surpass the polarization of society in general. This was the unfortunate reality of both Korean society and the Korean Church. Some people from both inside and outside the Church have taken issue with these problems, prompting many to reflect on and reconsider the situation. However, the continued existence of divisions related to issues such as growth and alienation, wealth and poverty means that the Korean Church still finds itself in a critically polarized condition.⁽³⁴⁾ The challenges that this current situation presents call for the Korean Church to develop a new vision of society and creative solutions for its realization.

2) Polarization of Conservative and Liberal Theology

Strictly speaking, the history of Korean theology is far shorter than that of the Korean Church in its entirety. In the early days of the missionized Korean Church, it was beyond its capacity even to

completely accept and digest the theology of the missionaries and other imported ideas. Of course, there were differences in the mission theology of individual missionaries and missionary groups, but it still took a considerable time for the Korean Christians and church leaders to be able to distinguish them sharply and form opinions of their own.

It can be said that theological differences started to arise among Korean theologians and in the church in the 1930s, when elite Christian leaders who had studied theology abroad came back and began to work. Still, most disputes over theology started by theologians who had studied abroad largely subsided when they were admonished by ecclesiastical authorities who exercised control over these issues. It is probably after 1945, especially with the secession of the “Presbyterian Church in the Republic of Korea” from the “Presbyterian Church in Korea,” that problems involving theological issues have had historically significant results.

Since then, the Korean theological community has been strictly divided into conservative and liberal groups, touching off acute theological arguments that have led to conflicts and schisms. Admittedly, clearly irreconcilable positions have appeared as a result of disparate theological views and sometimes deep and meaningful theological discussions. These include debates on the theological discourses imported from Western theological communities since the 1960s, such as secularization theology and the theology of the laity, and disputes over indigenous theology. Minjung theology, a famous example of the latter, has been particularly controversial. Arguments over the theology of religions, the theology of culture, and feminist theology can also be regarded as relatively unadulterated theological discussions.

However, it should be pointed out historically that in the progress of these debates, what triggered and intensified problems were not exactly the theological differences and ensuing confrontations themselves, but other problems that accompanied them. Almost all conflicts and divisions took place not because of differences in purely theological views but on account of disparities in political positions and views on social issues. Important factors at work included the extreme ideological confrontations in society, different positions on social problems, and collusion with, or criticism of, secular regimes. Theological differences were often cited as a reason for the conflicts and divisions, but in fact, theology itself was not responsible in many cases; instead, the confrontations within the Church were mostly the result of varying social and political inclinations and differences in the primary concerns of particular ecclesiastical communities.⁽³⁵⁾

The ecclesiastical confrontations continued even though the positions of the participants changed according to different periods and regimes. For example, when the military regimes were in power, the so-called “progressive theology camp” stood at the forefront of the democratization movement with almost all of its theological and missionary resources devoted to political and social struggles. On the other hand, the “conservative theology camp” maintained a supportive posture toward the regimes and concentrated on the growth of individual churches, personal evangelism, and revivals. They criticized progressives who were committed to political participation through social struggles

as anti-evangelicals opposed to the principle of the separation of church and state. Later, when the political environment changed and what were termed as the “Government of the People” and “Participatory Government” were in power, many leaders of progressive groups with a history of activity in the democratization movement were appointed to high positions. Subsequently, the progressive forces lost the politically critical and prophetic stance that they had maintained, while the conservative forces, which had previously advocated the separation of church and state, now took issue with the governments’ ideological position and assumed a critical stance.

Even now, Korean theologians do not really base their position solely on either conservative or progressive theology. In theological conflicts, confrontations between the two groups still focus on political and social positions and viewpoints regarding the government’s foreign policy rather than on clearly theological differences. More specifically, under the present administration, the conservative group is now pro-government, whereas the progressive group has taken a critical position. However, due to their history of participation in two former governments, the progressives have lost much of the power necessary for effective criticism.

3) Polarization of Political and Social Positions

It was been pointed out above that Korean theological communities have experienced confrontations and conflicts not simply because of differences in their theology, but because of the way in which theological disagreements have found political and social expression. As a matter of fact, this tendency is not limited to the post-1945 history of the Korean Church and its theology. During the early days of the mission and also under Japanese occupation, Korean Christians there was a close link between differing theological opinions and attitudes and different views on political and social issues, including the issue of how to deal with problems related to cooperation with the Japanese government.

The first Protestant missionaries who started the Korean mission maintained an evangelistic position and supported the principle of separation between church and state with reference to political and social issues. However, a considerable number of them were unable to remain indifferent to the “context” of the suffering and confusion of the Korean royal household and people as their country was threatened with the loss of national sovereignty in the late nineteenth century. They turned away from their previous theological positions and missionary methods, went against the guidelines of their missionary headquarters, and adopted a policy that some people considered to be a “mission of political participation.” A number of Protestant and Methodist missionaries stationed in Seoul had close relationships with Emperor Kojong and Empress Myongsong on an official and unofficial basis, as well as with Korean political and social leaders.⁽³⁶⁾ Early Korean Christians showed a “nation-comes-first” attitude in their faith or, in a broader sense, experienced an “ideological acceptance of Christianity,” with the primary motive of conversion being the desire to achieve “national goals.” Their understanding of Christianity therefore falls under the label of “social participatory gospel.”⁽³⁷⁾ This is indeed a concrete example that, even if the nature of “missionized Christianity” is constant,

the Christianity that is accepted can take on completely different characteristics according to the relevant “contextual power.”

Afterwards, the Korean Church underwent massive changes as it passed through several phases: the 1907 Great Revival, an important turning point in Korean ecclesiastical history; the March First Movement ⁽³⁸⁾ in 1919, the climax of Christian national and social participation; and after these moments of enlightenment and social participation, the period up to the end of Japanese colonial rule, when most Koreans suffered from extreme hardship and frustration. Basically, however, the characteristics of Korean Christianity and the actions of Korean Christians were both heavily dependent on the political, social, economic, and cultural “context,” a tendency that has remained strong throughout Korean Church history.

After Korea’s liberation in 1945, Korean Christians took different theological stances on the political and social responsibilities placed on the Korean Church, and this created, intense intra-church conflict. The problem became even more serious after 1970, when some Korean Christians began to take a more active political stance. This led to strife, both in and outside the church, between those who were critical of the regime and those who tacitly supported it. These divisions were further aggravated by the fact that some Christian groups stood at the forefront of the democratization movement, laying the foundation for the extreme polarization of today.

Some overseas theologians and Christian leaders still ask probing questions that point to the extreme polarization of the Korean Church. ⁽³⁹⁾ For instance, some have asked how one day, Christian demonstrators gathered at Seoul Plaza with “Pro-American and Anti-North Korean” placards only to be followed by another Christian demonstration gathering at the same place with “Anti-American and Pro-North Korean” placards the next day. Or they might ask about two different Christian demonstrations held on the same day, one at Seoul Plaza and the other at Seoul Station Plaza that also were in opposition to each other. ⁽⁴⁰⁾ Such questions, which cast doubt on the idea that these opposing groups within the Korean Church actually represent the same religion, can be taken as critical or even disparaging. Yet speaking from within the Korean Church, this polarization is truly worrisome if it means that both sides are losing their identities and that people are asking how these two different Christian camps can coexist under the same name and advance side by side in Korean society.

A Third Way Based on the Context

In the context of Korean Church history, we can detect one underlying dynamic of unifying energy that has continued to work throughout. Secondly, however, there is another underlying dynamic of energy that leads to conflicts and divisions. This has also been there since the beginning. It is possible for these contrasting dynamics to interact constructively as centripetal and centrifugal forces, but the many dramatic turns of events in modern Korean history have frequently caused them to find expression in serious confrontations. As observed above, there has existed a strongly denominational

Korean Church with a tradition of continuous cooperation and alliance in mission, the establishment of churches, and the management of organizations. More than that, in many instances, it has surpassed all internal opposition and stood side by side in helping the Korean people to cope with their suffering during the Japanese colonial era, even leading the attempt to recover national sovereignty during the March First Movement. It has also addressed problems stemming from the nation's division, war, and political and economic ordeals. It is easy to find such examples throughout Korean Church history. The heritage of cooperation and unity has erupted many times in the history of the Korean Church as a dynamic energy regardless of outside conditions. On the other hand, another line of tradition in Korean Church history has given witness to too many serious confrontations over ideology, regionalism, interests, hegemony and sometimes superficial theological disputes that were not based on real fundamental differences. Such confrontations have often expressed themselves in the division of churches and the polarization of theology and forms of social participation.

It is not just a minority opinion that at present Korean Christianity is going through a time when the tradition of conflict is venting itself in its most extreme form. As it is today, the Korean Church has a very unstable future. It has lost its ability to evangelize national society effectively, and has been exposed to the greatest anti-Christian atmosphere since missionaries first came to Korea. However, the way to overcome this problem also exists within the heritage of the Korean Church as does a clue about how it should shift its understanding of the present situation. First, the internal differences in Korean Christianity need to be seen as diverse colors in a single spectrum, not as representing a completely divided entity. It should also be recognized that "left and "right," like "front" and "rear," are not completely isolated from each other, but are part of the same line and can therefore move towards each other as well as in the opposite direction. This is the "way of dynamism," where the possibility always exists for one opposite to move towards the other.

Second, it is important to actively find the "tradition of union" which has been repeatedly at work in Korean Church history. By clearing up the misunderstanding that Korean Church history is filled with conflicts and divisions only, the "way of hope" will discover a history where one church and one tradition were pursued even under difficult conditions, enlisting the help of the context.

Third, the theological and missionary basis for the overcoming of this situation should be found in, for all its faults, ecumenism. In the Korean Church, ecumenism and the ecumenical movement have been regarded mostly as the exclusive property of some liberal theologians. Such views are derived mostly from a misunderstanding of history and the development of this movement, but before everything else, the concept of ecumenism needs to be redefined.

A new concept of ecumenism proposes that we lose the obsession with finding a common ground and building unity based on this and instead focus on open-minded discussions that aim to find differences between the opposing groups, respect and understand them, and advance together in areas where cooperation is possible. This is not to follow the logic of any one group, nor a fixed way of thinking from the progressive perspective. It can be the most concrete way of insuring reconciliation

and cooperation. This is, in fact, a “new way of ecumenism” which is oriented toward the most practicable path. Based on the explanations above, this author proposes that these three elements, namely, “dynamism,” “hope,” and “new ecumenism,” can come together as a “third way,” which is new but not entirely so, to overcome the ills of the Korean Church.

Conclusion

Historically, Christianity has not always existed in its most ideal form and has not been able to express its essence fully. Instead, it has always been under the sway of the power of a historical “context,” accepting it positively at some times and negatively at others. In this respect, the Korean Church is not an exception. It is well known that from the early stages of the mission and the first acceptance of Christianity, the Korean Church has endured an unending series of drastic changes and crises. This history has produced a church that has been more powerfully affected by “context power” than any other church in any other place or time, a church that did not begin as intended, or follow a natural, undisturbed course of development. However, at the same time, the Korean Church was also given the potential to return to its original course as a result of counteractive energy. Together, these characteristics have led to conflicts and confrontations of incomparable severity in the Korean Church. In turn, these have been a source of polarization and schism.

History always provides a clue to the solution of the problems of the present. After all, the Korean Church can hardly address its current challenges through either the first way or the contrasting second way. Consequently, a third way that embraces both the first and second ways is required. Needless to say, this third way should also be found in the lessons of history. Fortunately, Korean Church history has a rich heritage from which we can find what we are looking for with a simple change in our way of thinking. Alliance rather than breakup, union rather than disintegration, and specifically, a new concept of ecumenism are what make up the third way that this history reveals to us.

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- (16) "1. A common possession of small cities and their neighboring areas is not the best way of using our power. However, it is recommended that, as a general rule, both missions commonly possess an open port and a city with a population of 5,000 people or more and cities which can make a station necessary for the possession of other areas." Quoted in "1893 Agreement Between the Methodist and Protestant Churches," Lee Man-Yeol, ed., *Apenjello: Hangugeon Chot Songyosa* [Appenzeller: The First Missionary to Korea], 352.
- (17) *Annual Report of the Board of Foreign Missions of the Methodist Episcopal Church*, Korea Mission, 1915, 44.
- (18) See Lee Man-Yeol, *Hanguk Kidokkyo Uiryosa* [A History of the Korean Christian Medicine] (Seoul: Acanet, 2003), 307-372.
- (19) *Ibid.*, 418-424.
- (20) "The narrowness, selfishness, jealousy and spiritual pride which engenders divisions, and the paralysis and waste of energy, time, and money, which result, have been, one would think, sufficiently demonstrated both at home and on the foreign field to convince most rational men that as a policy at least, sectarianism is a failure, and grateful we are to see that an increasing host of Christians, are becoming convinced of this and are acting on their convictions. The divisive, self spirit, is now a days what is termed in American slang, "a back number," quite out of date, and yet alas it still carries influence enough to seriously hamper Gods work on many a field. Alas how can men thus foist our divisions on the young native church which neither knows nor cares anything about the reasons which caused the rise of the various denominations." L. H. Underwood, "A Prayer for Unity," *The Korea Mission Field*, Vol. IX , No. 1 (Jan. 1913), 23.
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