

# **Korean-American Churches and Evangelism:**

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**An Immigrant Church as Evangelistic Community**

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*Young parents and their children went to a local church. It was their first time attending the church. Although the family's experience of faith and church was almost nothing, their kind neighbors encouraged the family to visit their church and led the family to the Sunday gathering. The family's hesitation to enter the chapel and their reluctant greeting of other members definitely showed that they were first time visitors.*

*What would be the members' response to the visitors at a Korean-American Protestant church? First of all, the welcoming team will greet and lead them to a comfortable pew and keep records of simple information, such as their names, phone numbers, and the ages of the children. Then, a couple of Sunday school teachers would come to hug the little kids and take them to the children's programs. After the Sunday worship service, they will have a chance to meet and talk with the pastor and staff. In the meantime, the welcoming team arranges a lunch table for the visiting family, who can enjoy fellowship time with other members.*

Korean-American churches have emphasized a passion and good practices for evangelism. The word, 'evangelism' has a Greek root; 'εὐαγγελιον' which means good news. This suggests that evangelism is to share the good news of Jesus Christ. In practice, evangelism can be defined as a series of processes to introduce the Gospel, invite others to the church community, and empower them to live out the Christian life.<sup>1</sup> Compared to other ethnic churches and their neighboring American churches, Korean-American churches have valued evangelism as their priority for ministry and discipleship. These characteristics of Korean-American churches have resulted in the growth of churches and the evangelization of Korean immigrants through the decades.

What has made Korean-American churches so zealous and give such a priority to evangelism? We can identify one explanation from the customs of Korean Protestant theology. Several Korean Protestant churches emphasize the tradition of the Reformation in faith and life. The theology of "Justification," in which righteousness is achieved apart from sin by believing in Jesus Christ, has become the inception of Protestantism. Through faith and by grace, the reborn soul is saved and the believer continues to practice his faith. This "Regeneration and Sanctification"

1 "Evangelism" in *Westminster Dictionary of Theological Terms*, ed. Donald McKim (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996), 90, Robert E. Coleman, "Evangelism" in *Evangelical Dictionary of World Missions* ed. A. Scott Moreau (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2000), 341-42.

forms the foundation of the Protestant Faith.<sup>2</sup> The “faith” of Protestantism refers to the personal relationship with God, contrasting with the Catholic or Orthodox Church that emphasizes the relationship with the Church. Evangelism is the work of inviting another to this relationship with God and the changed life that subsequently occurs. Traditional Protestant evangelism emphasizes the individual believing in the Gospel and becoming a believer. This forms the basis of a more meaningful and effective way of evangelism, especially in the present day, in which individual faith and decision is more important than those of the nation and family.

Furthermore, Korean Protestantism is closely related to the Evangelical Mission Movement. Many of the foreign missionaries and the first generation Korean leaders that helped establish Protestantism in Korea had their background in an Evangelicalism that stresses rebirth and missions. Among current Korean Christians, the people who are in the religious order that firmly supports Evangelical theology is as high as 95%.<sup>3</sup> The notable feature of Evangelicalism that contrasts with liberalism lies in the emphasis of individual rebirth and Christian mission work. Among several teachings in Christianity, the last part of the Gospel of Matthew, commands that “teaching them to obey” is considered “The Great Commission” and is taken as the first duty for Christians who practice evangelism. Since evangelism leads to social reform and education, the theological flow that puts value in spreading the Gospel and creating Churches formed the mainstream of Korean Protestantism. And the same emphasis that American-Korean churches have on evangelism comes from this very tradition and legacy.

Second, the experience of Korean Christians underlines the evangelizing Christian and the Church. The history of Korean Protestantism starts in the 1880s. Churches formed as foreign missionaries and Korean evangelists started to evangelize one by one, yet Christians remained a minority of the population for a long period of time. The first and foremost mission of the Korean church was evangelism, and participating in this was a responsibility of all Christians. Expressions such as “Christ leads to heaven, disbelief leads to Hell,” “Public

2 Alister E. McGrath, *Reformation Thought: An Introduction*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 1999), 104-110, John Calvin, *Institute of Christian Religion*, Vol. 1, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford L. Battles (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster Press, 1960), lx.

3 Timothy Lee, “Beleaguered Success: Korean Evangelicalism in the Last Decade of the Twentieth Century” in *Christianity in Korea*, eds. Robert E. Buswell Jr. and Timothy S. Lee (Honolulu, HI: University of Hawai‘i Press, 2005), 335.

Evangelism,” and “Church planting movements” can always be found by exploring the history of each Church. National evangelization and the growth of churches has become synonymous with the reason for our church’s existence. Even though over 20% of the Korean population is Protestant only 130 years after the first missionary arrived, the majority of people are still outside of Church. In other words, we have always lived in a land that necessitates evangelism and we have always considered this as an urgent and significant mission. These experiences have been incorporated into the faith and churches of Korean immigrants, who aim to be an evangelizing church.

Third, Korean immigrant churches regard evangelism as their mission in their new land. Immigration enabled Korean-Americans to form their ethnic churches. They had an initial sense of responsibility to evangelize Korean immigrants as their focus group. Extending their understandings of the significance of saving souls and their experiences as an evangelistic community, Korean-American churches have developed their self-identity as a community for evangelizing Koreans in America. They firmly believed that the truth they believed in their mother land is still unchangingly true in this new land, and this truth is to be transferred to their brothers and sisters who are experiencing the harsh reality of their immigrant life. Therefore, the churches’ growth through evangelism should be the same mission for Korean-American Christians as it was in Korea.

In its evangelism ministries, Korean-American churches are not different from Korean churches in terms of the content of Gospel and their passion for saving souls, but in their targets, Korean immigrants. Korean-American churches are ethnic havens where Korean in America gather together to worship in Korean. The primary mission for ethnic churches is to form and keep the community so it can share the love of God and the Gospel to their the ethnic group. For Korean-American churches, it was the main goal and the reason for their churches to exist: to invite Korean-Americans and share their faith and mission with them.

In these ways, Korean-American Christians try to embrace the evangelizing mission through their churches’ ministries. The faith in evangelism and the experience of immigration has made the mission of Korean-American churches focus on being churches for evangelizing Korean immigrants. This sense of mission

brought the growth of local churches and created their characteristic as passionate churches for evangelism.

As Korean-American churches are experiencing the growth of a new generation, however, they are facing serious questions about their form of evangelism. How can a Korean-American church practice their beliefs about evangelism effectively? In what ways can they go beyond the limitation of being ethnic churches? What will happen to their theologies of evangelism as they seek to own future generations?

Korean-American churches have become evangelistic in their faith and practices regardless of their denomination and region. The growing immigrant community, the evangelical tradition, and the social functions of the immigrant society have provided fertile soil for Korean-American churches to bloom their evangelism and church growth. As the surrounding contexts are always fluid, Korean-American churches are recently confronting new changes which challenge their understandings and practices of an evangelism ministry. New changes evidently include the pattern and number of immigrants, post-modern and post-Christendom cultures, theological diversification, and, most importantly, the accumulated experiences of Americanization.<sup>4</sup> Seeking timely responses to these challenges, it is time for Korean-American churches to begin discussions about a new direction in their theology of evangelism while the churches keep their passion and effort for an evangelistic ministry.

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4 Kwang Chung Kim, SiYoung Park, and Jong Nam Choi, "Demographics and Residential Distribution" in *Koreans in the Windy City: 100 Years of Korean Americans in the Chicago Area*, eds. Hyock Chun, Kwang Chung Kim, and Shin Kim (New Haven, CO: East Rock Institute for the Centennial Publication Committee of Chicago, 2005), 37-39. 37-53. The authors summarize the recent changes of immigration trends from Korea. Helen Lee, "Hospitable Households," 135-37. Craig Van Gelder, "Missional Context: Understanding North American Culture" in *Missional Church: A Vision for the Sending of the Church in North America*, ed. Darrell L. Guder (Grand Rapids: Wm B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1998), 35-44. These two discuss post-modernity and the churches of North America. Sang Hyung Lee, "Asian-American Theology: Called to Be Pilgrims" in *Korean American Ministry*, eds. Sang Hyun Lee and John V. Moore (Louisville, KY: Presbyterian Church in the U. S. A., 1987), 39-65. Lee argues that the experiences of Korean immigrants in the U. S. A. construct new perspectives of theologies.

Seeking new directions of the theology in evangelism for Korean-American churches, this study suggests three theological principles. First, evangelism is not just a program or a practice, but a spirituality. In the fields of ministry, it is a deeply engraved misunderstanding that evangelism is doing something, which easily tempts us to follow the successful evangelistic program of churches in Korea or America. When local churches regard evangelism as a way of church growth or instrument for other ministry, it becomes blind to the needs of souls and the mission's spiritual challenges. It is not uncommon that a church's evangelism program holds the market principles of investment, productivity, efficiency and reliance on some effective programs and some members' abilities, and finally the goals and meaning of evangelism become confused.

Evangelism is a spiritual ministry. God initiates it. Fundamentally, it is God's mission to transfer the Gospel and save souls. It is God who gives the mission to God's people. The Holy Spirit is the leader and co-worker with the evangelists. J. Andrew Kirk, a missiologist, defines evangelism as the way and life through which Christians follow Christ. Proclaiming the Gospel, "evangelism", forms the identity of Christians and provides the way to make relationships in the world. Christians are sent for evangelism. Following Jesus is itself a life of evangelism.<sup>5</sup>

Therefore, evangelism is not a project but a process. Evangelism includes whole processes to invite others in to the presence of God as we know and experience it. We need to listen to Elaine Heath's explanation that evangelism is a process to introduce and develop a relationship with God who is speaking, teaching, and healing through the relationship.<sup>6</sup> These understandings enable us not only to do something for evangelism but also to be in the process of becoming an evangelist.

It is my point that evangelism in Korean-American churches should esteem the process of being and becoming an evangelist. Living in God's presence is the way to the Gospel and at the same time to proclaim the Gospel. Evangelism is living to invite neighbors into a relationship with God who they experience through immigration and settlement and evangelism lets them experience the relationship in the same way and in different ways as well. In this process, living with the Holy

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5 J. Andrew Kirk, *What Is Mission?: Theological Exploration* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2000), 52-55, 60-62.

6 Elaine A. Heath, *The Mystic Way of Evangelism: A Contemplative Vision for Christian Outreach* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 13.

Spirit is the foundation of evangelism and praying and witnessing with the Spirit in our lives is the ministry of evangelism.

Second, the goal of evangelism is not limited to inviting someone to a conversion experience but inviting them to belong to the Kingdom of God. Traditionally evangelism implies introducing the Gospel to non-Christians in order to make them Christians. Protestant traditions understood that conversion is a moment or a process to confirm a person's level of faith and repentance. They emphasized that it is through conversion, or a process of conversion, that a Christian approaches salvation. The goal of evangelism, however, is bigger and deeper than just conversion. It is an invitation to life in the Kingdom of God. Living as a citizen of the Kingdom of God means salvation of the soul and a life with God, establishing God's freedom, justice, and love.<sup>7</sup>

In this sense, evangelism is intended to invite one not to a local church or specific faith confession, but to a life with Jesus Christ and the hope of God's Kingdom.<sup>8</sup> The definition of evangelism should be extended beyond knowing the Gospel and being baptized to living life as a Christ follower. William J. Abraham argues evangelism is not just for salvation and for a church's ministry, but for the whole relationship with God and his Kingdom in both the temporal and ethereal life.

For example, in Christian mission history there were cases of mass baptism after a short introduction of Christian truth by missionaries. It was true that some missionaries equated counting numbers of the baptized with expanding the Kingdom of God in the colonial Americas and Africa. Today the churches regret these experiences, realizing that evangelism is to lead the listeners to learn the Gospel message, to experience life change through worship and missions, and transform one's individual life and social ethics in the light of the Gospel. Evangelism must include not only the introduction of the Gospel, but also all the teaching needed for the listeners to become Christ-followers and then to be evangelists.

Evangelism that invites anyone to be a citizen of the Kingdom of God consists of the salvation of souls and the salvation of physical, psychological, and social life. In the New Testament, Jesus' evangelism was accompanied by physical

7 J. Andrew Kirk, *What Is Mission?*, 29-30.

8 Abraham, Dallas Willard, "Rethinking Evangelism," *Cutting Edge* (Winter, 2001), <http://www.dwillard.org/articles/artview.asp?artID=53>, accessed by Dec. 31, 2013.

healing and liberation from social evils. The evangelism taught by Jesus proclaims the Gospel, plants churches, cares for the heart-broken, and helps the poor. Serving our neighbors' need and gathering for social justice is also an extended ministry of evangelism. Evangelism is through the word and works of every Christian. We are called to be the light and salt which point to God and God's Kingdom.<sup>9</sup> When Korean-Americans broaden their understanding and practice of evangelism, they can pursue holistic evangelism.

Holistic evangelism which invites people to the Kingdom of God calls Korean-American churches to redirect their identity as an evangelistic church for the Kingdom beyond being churches for an ethnic minority. Overcoming the dualism between soul and culture, proclamation and social justice, and Korean and American, evangelism inspires people to follow the way of Jesus' incarnation. It moves evangelistic priority from the local church or denomination to the Kingdom of God, which is open to all Christians.

Third, evangelism is the mission for which the whole church pulls together. Most Protestant churches in Korea have laid an emphasis on individual efforts, but every Christian is called to witness to the Gospel by word and works. Understanding faith as a personal relationship with God, evangelism is a practice of faith to introduce an individual to a relationship with God. The best resources for evangelism are missions, love, and the proclamation of individual Christians.

In addition to these individual practices, the church should be a community of evangelism. Troubles between church members are a great obstacle for evangelism. Many of the younger generation have been disappointed with the life of church members and left Korean-American congregations.<sup>10</sup> In other words, it is possible that healthier and more biblical churches might attract members from Korean-American churches. Local churches can be attractive to other Christians by praying together, sharing love and cooperating, and doing good works. It requires

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9 Ronald J. Sider, "Evangelism, Salvation, and Social Justice: Definitions and Interrelationships" in *The Study of Evangelism: Exploring a Missional Practice of the Church*, eds. Paul W. Chilcote and Lacey C. Warner (Grand Rapids: Wm B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2008), 200-203.

10 Sharon Kim, *A Faith of Our Own: Second-Generation Spirituality in Korean American Churches* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2010), 54.



that the members of a Christian community do not become exclusive, but reach out and include non-Christians and new Christians.

Reminding themselves to care for neighbors and to remain faithful to the Gospel, a congregation can become a community of evangelism. In *Worship Evangelism*, Sally Morgenthaler points out that holy and spiritual worship works for evangelism by allowing non-Christian participants to experience God, which is its fundamental purpose.<sup>11</sup> It is an agreed analysis that the rapid growth of Korean Catholics these days is the fruit of the church's efforts for social justice in Korea since the 1980s.<sup>12</sup> The effectiveness of the growing Home Church Movement is due to its structure that blurs the division of everyday life and church. Missions to change the church from a members' community to everybody's gathering place represents incarnational evangelism.

For this type of evangelism, an evangelist should be friends with non-Christians rather than a director or a guide. When missionaries evangelize non-Christians in a new field, the listeners pay attention to their sacrificial life and their passion rather than their explanation of truth. In the same manner, remembering that evangelism depends on experience before theory, a good evangelist presents faith by being a good faithful friend and the mission of the church is to form a community of faithful friends.

In this point, Korean-American churches are required to be a community of evangelists, and a community of friends. The tradition to respect relationship has become a double edged sword. It supports the practice of inviting new guests to church while having disharmonized relationships confuses the efforts of evangelism. Evangelism for Korean-American churches is dependent on being a community of faithful friends, which are the local churches.

Korean-American Christians keep their emphasis on evangelism and efforts focused on evangelistic ministry. They continue emphasizing the traditional understanding and practices of evangelism in their new land. The experience of immigration has strengthened their sense of evangelizing missions, especially

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11 Sally Morgenthaler, "Worship as Evangelism," *REV!* (May/June, 2007), 48-53.

12 J. J. Ziegler, "Where Converts Are Made," *The Catholic World Report* (May 11, 2011), [http://www.catholicworldreport.com/Item/679/where\\_converters\\_are\\_made.aspx#](http://www.catholicworldreport.com/Item/679/where_converters_are_made.aspx#). UsNeZ\_RDsX8, accessed by Dec. 31, 2013.

while neighboring American churches are losing their passion. Korean-American churches have taken evangelism as the primary mission given by God.

Recent changes in immigration trends and an emerging new generation call Korean-American churches to seek a new understanding of evangelism, overcoming the limitation of ethnic lines. New theological directions pursue broadening the understandings of evangelism as spirituality and holistic process and transforming churches into communities of evangelism. While it takes time and energy, it is an assignment for Korean-American churches, who must continue the evangelism ministry for Korean immigrants and the next generation. The process toward a new theology of evangelism would be valuable addition for contemporary churches in Korea and America.



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