

FAITH AND CULTURE IN COLLISION: SOUTH KOREAN IDENTITY
AND THE BELIEVER'S NEW LIFE IN CHRIST

Young Ho Park, Asia-Pacific Nazarene Theological Seminary

Introduction

South Korean society faces rapid cultural change, which creates new challenges for Christian faith and practice. Traditional communal values, shaped by Confucian filial piety, still influence the daily lives of new believers. Practices such as ancestral rites, social drinking, and weekend gatherings often conflict with faithful Christian living. Within the church, there are also cultural expectations—long hours of prayer, participation in every worship service, regular attendance at prayer retreats, visible acts of service, financial giving, or being chosen to lead public prayers. These expectations may unintentionally foster a performance-based spirituality. For new believers, it can be discouraging when recognition and opportunities seem unequally distributed, regardless of spiritual maturity or calling.

At the same time, through globalization, Korean society has shifted from tradition-oriented values to a growing emphasis on individual autonomy and self-constructed identity. Personal choice, consumerism, and the pursuit of a “pleasant and enjoyable life” have taken root deeply, to the point that they seem inseparable from modern Korean culture. This individualism and pragmatism often clash with the absolute claims of the Christian gospel, making evangelism and discipleship increasingly challenging.

In addition, Korean society reflects a unique form of cultural pluralism. Even among those who identify as Christians, it is common to find unconscious influences from Buddhism (concept of *inyun* or karmic ties), shamanism (belief in fortune or fate), and Confucianism (filial duty). This mixture of traditions demonstrates that religious pluralism is already embedded in the Korean mindset, and it complicates the process of forming a clear identity in Christ. For new believers, this tension between cultural heritage, societal expectations, and Christian discipleship presents a significant challenge.

Against this background, this study seeks to answer the central research question: How can new believers form their identity in Christ within the cultural context of South Korea? To address this, the following sub-questions are posed:

1. How do traditional communal values influence Christian faith and practice?
2. In what ways do postmodern individualism and pragmatism challenge Christian faith and evangelism in Korea?
3. How does the performance-based spirituality within Korean church culture affect the identity formation of new believers?
- 4.

The purpose of this study is to explore how both cultural and ecclesial pressures shape new believers' experiences, and to suggest gospel-centered pathways for authentic identity formation that move beyond cultural conformity or external performance.

The Perspective of Contextual Theology according to Matthew Cook's "Contextual But Still Objective" Theory

Matthew Cook explains the central dilemma faced by evangelical theology with the saying, “Whoever defines the problem owns the solution.” He argues that theology, like other fields, will vary in its solutions and applications depending on how problems are defined within cultural contexts.¹ This suggests that for new believers in Korea, cultural context is not merely a secondary element but rather a central factor in shaping theological understanding and application.

Balancing Objectivity and Social Location

Cook critiques the way traditional evangelicalism has pursued objectivity by treating culture primarily as an obstacle to be overcome. He points out the flaw in the assumption that one can simply “acknowledge and compensate for cultural influence” in order to produce culture-free theology, because this approach undervalues the role of culture itself.²

Instead, Cook redefines objective theology as “remaining faithful to God (the object) and Scripture (the norm) while communicating revelation effectively.”³ This definition emphasizes that the gospel must not be reduced to the translation of Western theological propositions but should be meaningfully communicated within the cultural categories and linguistic frameworks of Koreans.

The Inescapable Nature of Cultural Context in Theology

According to Cook’s concept of “social location,” every theology makes use of the vocabulary, concepts, and worldview of a particular cultural setting, and is created within that setting where it proves most useful.⁴ This connects directly with Lee Myeoung-Hyun’s analysis of Korean cultural realities:

“Even within a single village or neighborhood, one can observe the extreme diversity of Korean culture, where households that practice Christianity as an afterlife-centered monotheistic faith coexist with households that practice shamanism, a this-worldly and prosperity-centered polytheistic religion, or Buddhism, a religion blending sacred and secular aspects while remaining essentially non-theistic.”⁵

More significantly, Lee notes that “even among those who call themselves Christians, unconscious influences of Buddhist concepts such as *inyun* (relational destiny), shamanistic

¹ Matthew Cook et al., *Local Theology for the Global Church: Principles for an Evangelical Approach to Contextualization* (Pasadena, 2010), 75.

² Cook et al., *Local Theology for the Global Church*, 78.

³ Cook et al., *Local Theology for the Global Church*, 77.

⁴ Cook et al., *Local Theology for the Global Church*, 80.

⁵ Myeoung-Hyun Lee, “A Study on the Values of and Study Directions for Classical Novels in Korean Culture Education for Foreigners: With a Focus on *Chunhyangjeon*, *Shimcheongjeon*, and *Heungbujeon*,” *Multicultural Contents Studies* 17 (2014): 243, <https://doi.org/10.15400/mccs.2014.10.17.229>

beliefs in fortune or fate, and Confucian values of filial piety remain,” which demonstrates that “Korean cultural pluralism is already deeply internalized in the mindset of individual Koreans.”⁶

Applicability in the Korean Context

Cook’s theory is particularly relevant for new believers navigating Korea’s complex cultural environment. He emphasizes that “objective theology must ensure that revelation is actually received by the audience in the intended way.”⁷ This principle directly relates to the question of how new believers in Korea’s postmodern society can understand and apply the gospel. In this sense, contextual theology provides a framework for discerning which cultural practices can be embraced, transformed, or resisted in order to embody an authentic identity in Christ.

Theories of Culture: Individualism and Collectivism

Korean society has experienced rapid cultural transformation through globalization. As the world moved away from tradition and convention, people increasingly began to shape their own lives and construct their identities through a new form of individualism. Globalization initiated this shift toward individualism in Korea, and today it has become so deeply rooted that it is nearly impossible to imagine society without it.

This shift is clearly reflected in the research of Choi Dongkyu. The younger generation finds “*experiential certainty in the inner, emotional dimension of human life* more appealing than *epistemological certainty in the intellectual dimension*.”⁸ Moreover, “they prefer to judge matters by whether something works or not, rather than by debates over right and wrong. For them, the primary standard for assigning value is not an ethics of principle but a pragmatism based on effectiveness.”⁹

Theories of Culture: Transformation of Value Systems

Drawing on Choi Dong-Kyu’s research on Korea’s postmodern cultural and spiritual challenges, the transformation of Korean value systems can be observed in several ways that affect Christian faith and identity.

From vertical to horizontal relationships: Choi believes that traditional values are not given through hierarchies. He believes that there is a shift in culture to a more egalitarian view. “Values are no longer determined by hierarchical order. The vertical order system is shifting to a horizontal one, where individuals fulfill diverse roles and functions according to their unique characteristics, but are regarded as equal in value.”¹⁰ This shift reflects a growing desire for

⁶ *Ibid.*, 243.

⁷ Cook et al., *Local Theology for the Global Church*, 77.

⁸ Dong-Kyu Choi, “Challenges of the Postmodern Korean Culture and Tasks of the Korean Church,” *Theology and Praxis* 20 (2009): 355. UCI: G704-002029.2009..20.011.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 356.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 358

equality and personal expression, but it also challenges the traditional respect and community-centered values that have long shaped Korean Christianity.

Changing views of material wealth: “The older generations, who grew up in poverty, regarded material possessions as crucial values. By contrast, the younger generation did not experience such hardships. Thus, they are less attached to material wealth and are more inclined toward consumerism. Their interest lies more in consumption than in production.”¹¹ While this change may reduce the greed-driven pursuit of wealth, it also risks promoting a self-centered lifestyle that contrasts with biblical values of stewardship and contentment.

New life goals: “The recent popularity of the theme ‘Making a Billion’ in bookstores and on the internet reflects this shift. Many Koreans aspire to accumulate just enough wealth to create a self-sustaining financial system, retire early, and enjoy life through travel and hobbies.”¹² Such goals reveal a longing for rest and fulfillment, they also show how temporal comfort often replaces the deeper spiritual satisfaction that comes from a life centered on God.

Christian Identity in Postmodern Culture

Choi Dong-Kyu’s study highlights several features of Korean postmodern culture:

Pursuit of freedom and anti-authoritarianism: “This generation of sensibility despises those who are timid or pretentious in expressing themselves. They live as they wish without worrying about how others see them. They refuse to be bound by the guidebooks of life filled with the mindset of older generations. Instead, they seek to break them. If there is one motto that defines them, it is freedom.”¹³ This pursuit of freedom reflects a deep desire for authenticity, it can also lead to rejecting all forms of authority—including God’s. For Christians, true freedom is not the absence of boundaries but living under the loving lordship of Christ.

Liberalism grounded in economic independence: “They believe that to realize true individualism, one must be able to sustain their own livelihood. In other words, they think that only when one can provide for themselves can they become true liberals.”¹⁴ This mindset values self-sufficiency, but it risks fostering spiritual isolation. Instead of relying on God, they strive to achieve satisfaction through their own efforts. This leads to a loss of the sense of dependence on God, our ultimate provider.

Theological Perspectives on the Relationship Between Gospel and Culture

Cook’s theory of contextualization offers a theological response to these cultural challenges. He argues that “good theology must remain faithful to biblical witness (objective) while also being shaped in culturally specific ways.”¹⁵ This suggests that new Korean believers

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 363.

¹² Choi, “*Challenges of the Postmodern Korean Culture*,” 363

¹³ *Ibid.*, 363.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 363.

¹⁵ Cook et al., *Local Theology for the Global Church*, 86.

do not need to completely reject their cultural background but can instead discern and transform it in the light of the gospel.

In particular, Cook's concept of the "expansion of global truth" implies that Korean culture is not merely a passive recipient of the gospel but also a cultural resource that can make a unique contribution to the global church. His vision that "as more cultures approach the richness of God, we will see a fuller understanding of life with God"¹⁶ means that elements of Korean culture—such as strong communal values and filial piety—can provide biblical insights that Western individualistic Christianity may overlook.

*The Cultural Context of Contemporary Korea
Transition from Traditional to Individualistic Society*

Korean society has experienced a rapid transformation in values and identity, largely driven by globalization and the rise of new individualism. In the past, communities were tightly knit, and relationships with neighbors were considered essential. When moving into a new apartment, families would share rice cakes with their neighbors as a gesture of goodwill and mutual responsibility. Children often played together and freely visited each other's homes, sometimes staying for meals. This sense of neighborhood community reflected the traditional collectivist values of Korean society.

However, this communal atmosphere has almost disappeared. Today, when there is noise from upstairs neighbors, people no longer approach them directly but instead file complaints to the security office, and in extreme cases, even call the police. Incidents of violence, even murder, resulting from disputes over noise demonstrate the breakdown of communication and the prioritization of one's own pain over communal harmony. This transformation reflects a broader shift from collectivist traditions to a more individualistic mindset, where personal well-being and comfort are placed above communal relationships.

At the same time, value systems themselves have shifted. Hierarchical social orders that once defined worth have given way to horizontal relationships, where equality and authenticity matter more than rank or seniority. Respect for elders and leaders is no longer automatic but conditional on their character and fairness.¹⁷ Material values have also shifted: while older generations, raised in poverty, considered possessions a measure of success, younger generations—raised in affluence—pursue consumerism. They are more focused on lifestyle consumption, such as fashion, leisure, and travel, rather than material accumulation or production.¹⁸ A new cultural dream has emerged: financial independence and early retirement. The popularity of the "making a billion won" trend reflects this goal of retiring early and enjoying hobbies and travel.¹⁹

Thus, Korea has moved from a survival-driven society to a lifestyle-driven one, from vertical hierarchy to horizontal equality, and from collective sacrifice to individual fulfillment. While these changes provide freedom and creativity, they also raise challenges for the Korean

¹⁶ Cook et al., *Local Theology for the Global Church*, 88.

¹⁷ Choi, "Challenges of the Postmodern Korean Culture," 358.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 363-364.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 364.

church as it seeks to disciple believers in a culture increasingly focused on personal comfort and consumerism.

Pluralistic Characteristics of Korean Culture

Another defining feature of contemporary Korea is its deep pluralism, both religious and cultural. In a single village, households may simultaneously follow Christianity, shamanism, Buddhism, and Confucian practices. Even within Christian families, traces of Buddhist concepts such as *inyun* (relational destiny), shamanistic beliefs about fortune, and Confucian ideals of filial piety often remain, consciously or unconsciously.²⁰ This demonstrates that cultural pluralism is not just external but has been internalized in the identity of individual Koreans.

This pluralistic mindset shapes how Koreans interpret and live out their faith. It is possible for one person to identify as a Christian while still valuing Confucian respect for parents or Buddhist concepts of fate. As a result, the boundaries between religions and worldviews are blurred, creating a unique cultural context in which Christian discipleship must operate. This environment demands that theology not only confront overt pluralism but also carefully address the ways it is embedded within everyday cultural assumptions.

Korean culture is characterized by religious pluralism, where Christianity, Shamanism, Buddhism, and Confucianism coexist. This pluralism has deeply shaped Korean society, influencing moral values, traditions, and daily practices. While such diversity can sometimes lead to tension and misunderstanding, it also opens the door for dialogue and mutual enrichment. Geography, traditions, and cultural backgrounds do not necessarily have to keep people apart; instead, they can serve as bridges that foster deeper understanding and cooperation.²¹

Key Characteristics of the New Generation's Culture

The younger generation in Korea has developed distinct cultural characteristics that further reshape the landscape of faith and identity. They prioritize emotion and experience over intellectual or doctrinal certainty. As Choi notes, they find “experiential certainty in the inner, emotional dimension of human life more appealing than epistemological certainty in the intellectual dimension.” They prefer pragmatism—what works—over theoretical debates about right and wrong.²²

They also emphasize freedom and self-expression. This is visible in social media culture, where identity is constantly curated and displayed online. Many young people reject the “life guidebooks” of older generations, preferring instead to break conventions and live according to their own values. At the same time, they view true freedom as connected to economic

²⁰ Lee, “*A Study on the Values of Classical Novels*,” 24.

²¹ Kyo-Tae Jeon, ed., *Korea Insights: Light of the East* (Seoul: Sejong Corporation, 1974).

²² Choi, “*Challenges of the Postmodern Korean Culture*,” 356.

independence: only when one can support oneself financially is one considered a truly free individual.²³

Finally, consumerism has become central. The younger generation is not driven by the need to accumulate wealth endlessly but by the desire to consume meaningfully and enjoy life. This has fueled trends of early retirement and leisure-focused living, marking a significant departure from the sacrifice-driven mentality of previous generations.

For the church, this cultural reality raises important questions. How can the gospel be presented to a generation that values experience over doctrine, freedom over hierarchy, and consumption over sacrifice? The answer must come not through rejecting these values outright but through discerning how biblical truth speaks within and beyond them—affirming what is good, challenging what is destructive, and offering Christ as the true source of freedom, joy, and identity.

Although Korea's younger generation strongly embraces individualism and pragmatism, traces of traditional collectivist and Confucian values still remain deeply embedded in their social fabric. Family expectations respect for elders, and the pursuit of harmony continue to shape personal decisions, even among those who claim to value freedom and independence. In other words, while the new generation seeks autonomy, they cannot fully escape the relational and hierarchical dynamics inherited from their cultural roots. This tension between modern individualism, traditional collectivism, ancestor worship and social drinking culture creates unique spiritual challenges for new believers in Korea today.

Cultural Pressures and Challenges for New Believers

Though the postmodern Korean generation has moved away from much of their parent's beliefs, there are still deep, embedded traditions and beliefs that influence their identity.

Communal Pressure Rooted in Collectivism

Despite Korea's shift toward individualism, strong collectivist values persist, particularly in family and community settings. New believers face pressure to prioritize group harmony over personal convictions. This manifests in expectations to:

- Attend family, friends or work gatherings that may conflict with worship services
- Participate in community festivals with religious overtones
- Conform to group decisions even when they conflict with Christian principles
- Maintain face (*che-myeon*) for the family or community rather than standing on biblical truth

The traditional Korean saying “The nail that sticks out gets hammered down” reflects the cultural reality that those who resist conformity are often criticized or pressured back into line. For Christians in Korea, this perfectly describes the tension of living faithfully amid ancestor

²³ *Ibid.*, 366.

worship, drinking culture, and collectivist expectations. To reject these practices is to risk being “hammered down” by family, colleagues, or society.

Yet, it is precisely in this pressure that the gospel calls believers to stand distinct. Just as Israel was set apart as a holy nation (Ex. 19:6), Korean Christians today are invited to embody a different story—one that honors family without idolatry, builds relationships without dependency on alcohol, and seeks harmony without compromising truth. The church must provide the support of a new family and a new cultural imagination, where standing out for Christ is not shameful but a sign of hope.

In this way, what the culture sees as a “nail that must be hammered down,” God sees as a testimony to His kingdom breaking into the world.

Ancestor Worship and Memorial Rites

Korean society's Confucian heritage places enormous emphasis on filial piety (*hyo*) and ancestral veneration. New believers face significant pressure from family members to participate in ancestral memorial rites (*jesa*), which involve offering food, bowing, and burning incense to deceased relatives. Family elders often view refusal to participate as a betrayal of family honor and cultural identity.

For new Christians, this creates a profound dilemma. While they understand these practices as incompatible with Christian monotheism, complete rejection often results in family conflict, social isolation, and accusations of being “unfilial” or “westernized.” The challenge is compounded by the fact that these rituals are not merely religious but are deeply embedded in Korean concepts of family loyalty and cultural continuity.

Social Drinking Culture

Korean business and social culture is heavily centered around alcohol consumption. The concept of *hoesik* (company dinner with drinking) and *sul-jari* (drinking gatherings) are considered essential for building relationships, conducting business, and maintaining social harmony. New believers often find themselves excluded from important social networks when they decline to participate in drinking culture.

This exclusion affects not only social relationships but also professional advancement. Many business deals are concluded over drinks, and refusal to participate can be interpreted as rejection of Korean cultural values or lack of team spirit. For new believers, navigating this culture while maintaining their faith convictions requires significant wisdom and often comes at a social cost.

The Challenges of Individualism and the Freedom of Choice

Contemporary Korean culture increasingly emphasizes personal choice and self-constructed identity. This creates unique challenges for new believers:

Resistance to Authority: The younger generation “despises those who are timid or pretentious in expressing themselves” and “refuses to be bound by the guidebooks of life filled with the mindset of older generations.”²⁴ This anti-authoritarian stance makes it difficult to accept biblical authority or church leadership.

Self-Determined Spirituality: New believers influenced by this mindset tend to approach faith as a consumer choice,²⁵ selecting aspects of Christianity that appeal to them while rejecting elements that seem restrictive or demanding. This leads to a Christianity that lacks coherence and commitment.

Economic Independence as Freedom: The belief that “true individualism” requires economic self-sufficiency creates tension with Christian teachings about dependence on God and sacrificial giving.²⁶ Many new believers struggle to reconcile pursuit of financial independence with biblical calls to trust and generosity.

Relativism and Religious Pluralism

Korea’s pluralistic religious environment, where “Christianity, shamanism, Buddhism, and Confucianism coexist,” creates a context where exclusive Christian truth claims seem narrow and intolerant. New believers face several challenges:

Internalized Pluralism: Even within Christian families, traces of other religious traditions often remain. Buddhist concepts such as *inyun* (relational destiny), shamanistic beliefs about fortune, and Confucian ideals of filial piety often remain. For example, *inyun* refers to “relational destiny”—the idea that one’s life is largely determined by what kinds of people they meet and whether those relationships turn out to be beneficial or harmful. Many believe this “relational destiny” can be influenced or changed by human effort. While common in everyday speech, this belief subtly undermines the biblical conviction that it is God’s providence, not human luck, that guides our lives. practices involving fortune or ancestral spirits, and Confucian ideals of filial piety can subtly influence Christian households. And, a Christian parent might pray at church on Sunday but still consult a fortune-teller when a child is about to take an important exam. These internal contradictions create confusion for younger believers and make it difficult to form a consistent Christian worldview.

Social Pressure for Tolerance: Modern Korean society increasingly prizes religious tolerance and harmony. While this promotes peace, it often translates into pressure to avoid making exclusive claims about faith. When Christians affirm that salvation is found in Christ alone (John 14:6), they are sometimes viewed as arrogant, intolerant, or even “anti-Korean” because they seem to challenge the cultural value of harmony. In universities or workplaces, Christian students who openly share their faith may be told, “All religions are basically the same,” or “Don’t impose your beliefs on others.” This creates a difficult environment where bold witness can feel like cultural disloyalty.

²⁴ Choi, “Challenges of the Postmodern Korean Culture,” 363

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 358

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 366

Pragmatic Faith: The younger generation in Korea often approaches life through a pragmatic lens: “Does it work?” rather than “Is it true?” Faith can easily become utilitarian—something pursued for success, emotional comfort, or material blessing. For instance, some students may attend church not because of a deep conviction about Christ, but because they hope prayer will help them pass exams or get a good job or making girl or boy friends. This mirrors a Darwinian survival-of-the-fittest mindset, where religion is evaluated by its usefulness in personal advancement rather than its truth or call to obedience.

Instant Gratification and Social Media-Centered Life

Modern Korean culture, especially among younger generations, is characterized by instant gratification and social media validation:

Experience Over Doctrine: New believers influenced by postmodern culture often find experiential certainty in the inner, emotional dimension of human life more appealing than epistemological certainty in the intellectual dimension. This can lead to a faith shaped primarily by moods or feelings rather than by Scripture. For example, if worship produces an emotional high, faith feels “strong,” but in seasons of dryness or suffering, faith seems to “disappear.” As a result, discipleship may be shallow and vulnerable to instability when emotions fluctuate.

Pursuing only the intensity of spiritual highs can also push believers toward dangerous misunderstandings. Some may begin to think that their spiritual life is only “real” when they feel constant passion or excitement. This often leads to dependence on external events such as attending special revival or Spirit-filled camps, where they seek repeated emotional experiences. Others may become obsessed with specific manifestations, such as speaking in tongues, treating them as proof of the Spirit’s power rather than as one gift among many. In these cases, the pursuit of emotional intensity replaces the deeper work of steady obedience, daily discipleship, and spiritual maturity grounded in God’s Word.

Performance for Validation: Social media culture encourages constant self-presentation and validation-seeking. New believers may come to church with the subconscious desire to “perform”—whether by volunteering, singing, or posting pictures—seeking likes and recognition rather than genuine transformation. The danger is that Christian community becomes another stage for self-promotion, rather than a space for humility, confession, and mutual encouragement. This performance-based spirituality can easily mask insecurity and prevent authentic spiritual growth.

Short-Term Commitment: The culture of instant gratification makes it difficult to embrace Christianity’s call for long-term discipleship, patient spiritual growth, and delayed rewards. Many expect immediate blessings or solutions to problems after conversion. When difficulties persist, they may feel disappointed and drift away. Churches sometimes unintentionally reinforce this by focusing on “quick results” such as attendance numbers or fast church growth rather than the slow work of forming Christlike character.

Issues of Behavior-Oriented Faith Practices

Korean church culture often emphasizes external behaviors over internal transformation, creating additional pressure for new believers.

Performance-Based Spirituality: This researcher's observation believes that churches may unintentionally foster a spirituality measured by visible activities—length of prayer time, frequency of church attendance, participation in revival meetings, or public expressions of faith. This can make faith feel like a performance to be evaluated rather than a relationship with God to be nurtured. New believers may feel that unless they pray with tears or attend every service, their faith is not genuine.

Comparison and Hierarchy: When recognition and opportunities seem *unequally distributed, regardless of spiritual maturity or calling*, new believers may become discouraged or develop competitive attitudes. For example, if someone who joined the church later is suddenly given a visible responsibility—such as leading prayer in worship or coordinating a ministry—others may feel overlooked and resentful. In some cases, jealousy leads to harmful outcomes: members gossip that the pastor is showing favoritism, spread false rumors, or even create divisions within the church community. What began as a simple issue of order becomes a source of conflict that damages the unity of the body of Christ.

Burden of Visible Expectations and the Convergence of Pressures

New believers in Korean church culture often face heavy expectations to demonstrate their faith through visible actions. They may feel pressure to attend every worship service, pray for long hours, join frequent revival meetings or retreats, and show devotion through public acts of service, financial giving, or prayer. While such practices can be spiritually valuable, the sheer weight of expectations can overwhelm newcomers.

This burden shows itself in several ways:

Public Roles and Premature Leadership Pressure: Many churches encourage new believers to adapt quickly by assigning them public roles such as leading prayers, reading Scripture, or taking part in worship services. While the intention is positive—helping newcomers feel included—such practices can have the opposite effect. Those not spiritually ready may feel embarrassed, pressured, or even discouraged. In some cases, individuals are placed in leadership roles based on social status or enthusiasm rather than maturity, leading to burnout or insecurity.

Financial Giving Stress: Expectations to give specific amounts or percentages can create guilt or financial hardship. In many Korean churches, this burden extends further when believers take on official roles such as deacon, elder, or church officer. Cultural norms often dictate that those appointed provide large special offerings, food for the congregation, or even purchase new instruments. What is intended as service becomes a financial burden, leading some to associate leadership with cost rather than joyful responsibility. When these pressures within church culture

are combined with broader cultural and social expectations, the weight becomes even heavier. New believers must navigate:

Identity Confusion: Feeling torn between loyalty to family traditions (e.g., ancestral rites) and loyalty to church teachings, sometimes facing judgment from both sides.

Spiritual Exhaustion: Managing the demands of church, family, and workplace at once often leads to burnout rather than growth.

Isolation: Feeling distant from both secular peers and church members, especially when honesty or weakness feels unwelcome in performance-driven communities.

Performance Anxiety: Obsessing over not measuring up—whether in prayer, giving, or service—can drive some away from participation altogether.

Research confirms these dynamics. For instance, one study of South Korean young adult immigrants found that while church involvement can provide support, excessive expectations often increase stress and strain on emotional well-being. Similarly, during the COVID-19 pandemic, studies showed that while spiritual support reduced anxiety, burdensome demands from church life correlated with heightened stress.²⁷

Altogether, these pressures show that the church needs a wiser and more caring way to make disciples—one that respects Korean culture while staying true to the Bible. Instead of forcing new believers to show their faith through outward actions, churches should help them slowly grow in Christ, learn honestly, and find joy in their faith within their own culture.

Toward Contextualized Gospel-Centered Discipleship

As with all targeted discipleship programs or methodologies, context is crucial in establishing long-term impact. Several missiologists have explored the importance of examining context for effective transformation.

Application of Cook's Contextualization Theory

In Cook's theory we find a pursuit of theology that is both objective and contextual and provides a crucial foundation for addressing the identity challenges faced by new Korean believers. His redefinition of objective theology as "remaining faithful to God (the object) and Scripture (the norm) while communicating revelation effectively" offers a way forward that neither compromises biblical truth nor ignores cultural realities.²⁸ For Korean new believers, this means that their faith formation need not require complete cultural abandonment. As Cook emphasizes, "objective theology must ensure that revelation is actually received by the audience

²⁷ Chulwoo Park and Mark Edberg, "The Effects of Spiritual Experience and Church Commitment among South Korean Young Adult Immigrants in the United States: A Mixed-Methods Study," *Journal of Global Health Reports* 4 (2020): 7, <https://doi.org/10.29392/001c.17608>

²⁸ Cook et al., *Local Theology for the Global Church*, 7.

in the intended way.”²⁹ This principle directly addresses how new believers in Korea's postmodern society can understand and apply the gospel within their cultural context rather than despite it.

Application of Hiebert's Critical Contextualization Process

The critical contextualization process developed by Paul Hiebert provides practical steps for applying Cook's theological vision. As Bauer summarizes, “the Word of God must be the basis for deciding lifestyle or cultural issues.”³⁰ The process unfolds in four stages:

1. Begin with **Scripture as the foundation** for discernment.
2. **Understand the cultural practice** in detail, examining its meaning, history, and function in the community.
3. **Evaluate the practice biblically**, using prayer, relevant passages, and theological discussion to discern what must be rejected, transformed, or retained.
4. **Empower local leaders** to make final decisions under the Spirit's guidance, ensuring ownership and cultural authenticity.

This process was vividly applied in Cambodia in 1998 when pastors gathered to address wedding practices. They first examined Cambodian weddings in their entirety, noting their social and cultural significance. Then, through prayer and biblical reflection, they identified which practices could remain, which could be altered, and which must be discarded. For example, the involvement of Buddhist monks was removed and replaced by an Adventist pastor who shared biblical principles about marriage, while many traditional elements were retained so that the ceremony remained culturally Cambodian but distinctly Christian.³¹ The pastors themselves reached consensus, ensuring that the new wedding model was not imposed by foreign missionaries but owned by the local church.

Discernment Criteria: Resistance, Transformation, and Accommodation of Culture

Drawing from both Cook's theory and Hiebert's process, Korean churches must develop clear criteria for cultural engagement. As one missionary practitioner notes, “Missionaries continually walked a tightrope between adaptation to culture and rejection of those features that could not be reconciled with the gospel.”³² This same discernment is vital for new Korean believers:

Resistance Model: Some practices must be rejected outright, such as ancestral rites attributing divine power to ancestors, shamanistic rituals invoking spirits, or deceptive business practices.

²⁹ Cook et al., *Local Theology for the Global Church*, 77.

³⁰ Bruce L. Bauer, “Critical Contextualization: Case Studies from Cambodia,” *Journal of Adventist Mission Studies* 14, no. 2 (2018): 11, <https://dx.doi.org/10.32597/jams/vol14/iss2/4/>.

³¹ Bauer, “Critical Contextualization,” 12-13.

³² Lynn D. Shmidt, “How Much Syncretism Is Allowed?” *Missio Nexus*, January 1, 2013, <https://missionexus.org/how-much-syncretism-is-allowed/>.

Transformation Model: Other practices can be redirected through biblical truth—for example, filial piety reoriented toward God, communal harmony applied to Christian fellowship, or the cultural value of education channeled into spiritual growth.

Accommodation Model: Still others may be affirmed without change, such as hospitality, perseverance, and respect for creation.

The Cambodia case reminds us that discernment requires “prayer and reading relevant biblical passages, and deep discussion about cultural meanings.”³³ Most importantly, the final decision must be made by local believers themselves under the Spirit’s leading, ensuring that Christianity grows as both authentically biblical and authentically rooted in its cultural soil.

Practical Guidelines for Korean Churches: Christian Responses to Traditional Culture

Korean churches must move beyond simply maintaining imported Western forms of worship and church life. Too often, Korean congregations have equated spiritual authenticity with practices that mirror foreign traditions—whether in worship style, architecture, or ceremonial structures. While these practices may provide comfort for long-standing members, they can feel alien to new believers seeking a faith that speaks naturally into their Korean context. Instead of assuming that spirituality must be expressed in Westernized forms, churches should critically examine which practices genuinely reflect biblical faith and which may unintentionally create barriers.

Addressing Ancestral Rites

Instead of condemning all participation in ancestral rites with extreme criticism, churches can draw from Paul’s principle in 1 Corinthians 8:9–13. Paul reminds believers that while eating food sacrificed to idols does not destroy one’s faith in God, exercising personal freedom without discernment can cause others to stumble. In the same way, attending a family gathering (Jesa) does not automatically mean that one’s trust in God is compromised. However, if such actions confuse or discourage other believers, Christians should refrain for the sake of community witness. This balanced approach prevents unnecessary family conflict while also honoring biblical convictions.

Navigating Social Drinking

Issues like alcohol and tobacco often carry strong cultural stigma in Korean churches. Yet an overly harsh or judgmental stance can alienate those who are still in the process of spiritual growth. I personally remember how, before giving up drinking and smoking, I would have felt deeply unwelcome if the church only condemned my habits without offering grace. Instead of creating barriers, churches should embody Christ’s patient love, walking with new believers as they gradually experience transformation. Excessive criticism risks making them feel excluded, whereas a community of grace fosters belonging and growth.

³³ Bauer, “Critical Contextualization,” 12.

Handling Communal Pressure

Korean collectivism can both support and challenge Christian faith:

- Emphasizing how Christian community fulfills Korean communal values at a deeper level
- Teaching believers how to honor family and community while maintaining primary loyalty to Christ
- Developing church communities that provide the belonging and identity traditionally found in Korean social structures

Faith Formation in a Postmodern Context

The contemporary Korean context, influenced by both traditional collectivism and emerging individualism, requires specific attention to postmodern challenges identified in the cultural analysis. The younger generation finds experiential certainty in the inner, emotional dimension of human life more appealing than epistemological certainty in the intellectual dimension.”³⁴

Addressing Relativism: Churches must help new believers navigate religious pluralism without falling into relativistic thinking by:

- Teaching the uniqueness of Christ while respecting Korean cultural diversity
- Helping believers understand how Christianity fulfills rather than replaces their Korean identity
- Providing intellectual foundations for faith that satisfy both heart and mind

Engaging Pragmatism: Since younger Koreans “prefer to judge matters by whether something works or not, rather than by debates over right and wrong,”³⁵ churches must demonstrate Christianity's practical relevance by:

- Showing how Christian principles actually improve relationships, work, and personal fulfillment
- Connecting ancient biblical wisdom to contemporary Korean challenges
- Emphasizing transformation rather than mere rule-following

Responding to Individualism: The shift toward individual choice and self-constructed identity requires careful balance by:

- Affirming personal relationship with Christ while maintaining community emphasis
- Helping believers understand freedom in Christ versus cultural freedom
- Teaching biblical decision-making that transcends both individualistic choice and traditional conformity

³⁴ Choi, “*Challenges of the Postmodern Korean Culture*,” 355.

³⁵ Choi, “*Challenges of the Postmodern Korean Culture*,” 356.

Transforming Church Culture

Korean church culture itself often creates barriers through “performance-based spirituality” that may “unintentionally foster spirituality based on visible activities.” Critical transformation is needed by:

- Evaluating whether requirements reflect biblical principles or cultural traditions
- Ensuring recognition is based on spiritual maturity rather than external performance
- Creating space for different personality types and spiritual expressions

As one practitioner warns, when churches maintain identical worship styles globally, “the foreign visitor is comfortable, but how about the local people?”³⁶ Korean churches must incorporate Korean musical and artistic traditions that align with biblical worship, use Korean cultural metaphors in teaching, and adapt church governance to reflect both biblical principles and Korean cultural wisdom.

Establishing Christ-Centered Identity as Primary

The ultimate goal is helping new believers understand their identity in Christ as foundational while allowing other identities to find their proper place. This requires addressing the false choice between being “Korean” or “Christian.”

New believers must understand that their identity in Christ provides the interpretive framework for all other identities, teaching that being Christian enhances rather than diminishes Korean identity. Churches must resist imposing Western Christian culture, recognizing that “God is not just the God of Western people. He is the God of all peoples, in all countries, and in all cultures of the world.”³⁷

Healthy Integration with Cultural Identities

The goal is integration rather than elimination of Korean cultural identity. The traditional Korean character demonstrates “wonderful capabilities” to “live beyond inconvenience, hindrances to their purposes, and handicap, and do all this without complaint.”³⁸ This resilience reflects Christian virtues of perseverance and contentment.

Korean “steadfast loyalty to family and country”³⁹ can be channeled into understanding covenant faithfulness and kingdom citizenship. Rather than viewing Korean culture as obstacle, churches can build on cultural strengths: Korean respect for education can enhance biblical study, traditional hospitality can model Christian love, and Korean resilience can inform understanding of Christian endurance.

³⁶ Bauer, “Critical Contextualization,” 17.

³⁷ Bauer, “Critical Contextualization,” 16.

³⁸ Jeon, *Korea Insights*, 28.

³⁹ Jeon, *Korea Insights*, 48.

Conclusion

This study has explored the complex interplay between South Korean culture and the identity formation of new believers in Christ. Traditional communal expectations—such as ancestral rites, social drinking, and collectivist pressures—continue to shape the daily lives of Christians, often placing them in tension with biblical convictions. At the same time, postmodern influences such as individualism, relativism, and pragmatism create new challenges for evangelism and discipleship, leading many to view faith as a matter of personal preference, emotional experience, or practical utility.

Within the church, these cultural pressures are further compounded by performance-based spirituality. The emphasis on visible acts—lengthy prayers, frequent attendance, financial contributions, and public roles—often overwhelms new believers and risks reducing Christian life to external performance rather than genuine transformation. Such overlapping pressures—cultural, social, and ecclesial—frequently result in identity confusion, spiritual exhaustion, and even withdrawal from Christian community.

Against this backdrop, the frameworks of Matthew Cook and Paul Hiebert provide helpful pathways forward. Cook’s call for theology that is both objective and contextual affirms that Korean believers do not need to abandon their cultural identity but can discern how the gospel speaks into it. Hiebert’s critical contextualization process offers practical steps—beginning with Scripture, examining cultural practices, evaluating them biblically, and empowering local believers to decide what to accept, transform, or reject. These principles enable Korean churches to engage culture without compromise while nurturing authentic discipleship.

The way forward requires both courage and humility. Korean Christians must resist practices that contradict biblical truth, transform values such as filial piety and communal loyalty in light of the gospel, and affirm cultural strengths such as hospitality, perseverance, and respect for creation. At the same time, churches must critically examine their own traditions, reducing performance pressures and creating space for diverse expressions of faith. By contextualizing worship, teaching, and discipleship in ways that are authentically Korean and biblically faithful, the church can help new believers discover that their identity in Christ does not compete with their cultural heritage but redeems and reorients it.

Ultimately, the task is not to choose between being “Korean” or “Christian,” but to live as Korean Christians whose identity is rooted in Christ and expressed through their cultural distinctives. In this way, the gospel can take deep root in Korea’s soil, producing disciples who embody both faithfulness to Scripture and sensitivity to culture. Such an approach not only strengthens the Korean church but also enriches the global body of Christ with unique insights and witness.

Bibliography

Bauer, Bruce L. “Critical Contextualization: Case Studies from Cambodia.” *Journal of Adventist Mission Studies* 14, no. 2 (2018): 11–17. <https://dx.doi.org/10.32597/jams/vol14/iss2/4/>.

- Choi, Dong-Kyu. "Challenges of the Postmodern Korean Culture and Tasks of the Korean Church." *Theology and Praxis* 20 (2009): 349–384. UCI: G704-002029.2009..20.011.
- Cook, Matthew, Rob Haskell, Ruth Julian, and Natee Tanchanpongs, *Local Theology for the Global Church: Principles for an Evangelical Approach to Contextualization*. Pasadena, 2010.
- Jeon, Kyo-Tae, ed. *Korea Insights: Light of the East*. Seoul: Sejong Corporation, 1974.
- Lee, Myeoung-Hyun. "A Study on the Values of and Study Directions for Classical Novels in Korean Culture Education for Foreigners: With a Focus on Chunhyangjeon, Shimcheongjeon, and Heungbujeon." *Multicultural Contents Studies* 17 (2014): 229–252. <https://doi.org/10.15400/mccs.2014.10.17.229>
- Park, Chulwoo, and Mark Edberg. "The Effects of Spiritual Experience and Church Commitment among South Korean Young Adult Immigrants in the United States: A Mixed-Methods Study." *Journal of Global Health Reports* 4 (2020). <https://doi.org/10.29392/001c.17608>
- Shmidt, Lynn D. "How Much Syncretism Is Allowed?" *Missio Nexus*, January 1, 2013. <https://missionexus.org/how-much-syncretism-is-allowed/>.
- Yoo, Jieun. "Online Religious Involvement, Spiritual Support, Depression, and Anxiety during the COVID-19 Pandemic," *Religions* 13, no. 11 (2022): 1052. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel13111052>