

A Critical Reflection on the History of the Church of the Nazarene in Korea

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The Christian church has grown and flourished faster in the Republic of Korea than in any other Asian nation. But the Church of the Nazarene has been grown considerably less and slower than other major denominations in Korea. This essay briefly reflects on the history of the Church of the Nazarene in Korea, critically elucidating the reasons for its relatively slower growth. It has three main sections — Memory, Challenges, and Alternatives — offer suggestions for improving the rate of church growth and reshaping the theology of the denomination.

Memory

The Christian church (Nestorians) apparently first touched the Korean peninsula by way of China sometime during the 7th century (during the Shilla dynasty — B.C. 57—A.D. 935). In 1784 a Korean student, Seung-Hun Lee, was baptized in China and returned to disseminate Catholicism in the midst of Korean Confucian, Buddhist, and Shamanistic cultures. It was another hundred years (1884) before Protestantism arrived in Korea in the person of Horace N. Allen, an American physician-missionary. Initial growth came among the Presbyterian and Methodist Churches. About half a century later in 1932, Rev. Sung-ok Jang, who had attended a Holiness College in Japan and became a Nazarene minister, planted a Nazarene Church at Pyung Yang, in North Korea. In 1936 Rev. Jung-Hwan Cho planted a Nazarene Church in Pyung Yang with the support of American Missionaries in Japan. Rev. Jang closed his church in 1939 because of persecution from the Japanese

emperor, who attempted to enforce Shintoism as the national religion. Just prior to closing the Church in 1938, Rev. Jang planted a Nazarene church in Seoul.

Ten years later the Korea Church of the Nazarene was officially organized in Seoul on October 25, 1948, with the visit of General Superintendent Orval J. Nease. Nease stayed in Korea for 8 days and preached the doctrine and policy of the Church of the Nazarene. Nine ministers, including three already Nazarene ministers, and ministers from the Assembly of God and the Holiness Church joined the denomination. The General Superintendent's visit came at the request of Rev. Robert (Nam-Soo) Chung, who had attempted to establish the denomination before its official organization. His role in establishing the denomination — his dedicated contributions, enthusiastic efforts, and faithfulness to the identity of the Church of the Nazarene — should not be underestimated.

When Dr. Donald Owens, the first Nazarene missionary to Korea, arrived in 1954, he founded a Bible school to train ministers, which eventually became Korea Nazarene University. Today, the school has 2,223 students including graduate students. Of these, 84 are graduate theology students and 327 are undergraduate theology majors. Since the official organization of the Church, it has grown only modestly. As of March, 2001, there were 252 churches, with 415 ministers and 31,707 members.

The history of the Church of the Nazarene in Korea can be divided into three stages: initial formation and development (1948-1973 — one mission district), growth and expansion (1974-1997 — growth from 2 to 5 districts), and maturity (1998-present — regular districts with a self-supporting university).

Challenges

The Nazarene Church did not grow relatively as much or as fast as other denominations during 1970s and '80s, the prime period of church growth in Korea. Before

this prime time, at the formative stages of the Church's history, one unfortunate geographical choice decisively complicated its prospects for growth. The denomination planted churches for the dissemination of the gospel and deployment of the ministers primarily in the rural central West coast of the country. Church leaders did not anticipate the industrialization and urbanization, which would cause people to stream into industrialized urban centers. Few people were left in the country to win to Christ as the prime time passed.

From the beginning of the Church's formation, deficiencies in the denomination's identity and an inadequate theology of holiness interfered with the expansion of the Church, which was already facing challenges as a minority religion regarded with suspicion. There had been little conscientization of the Church as a good church with sound doctrine for ministers and lay people to have confidence and pride in. There was no solid holiness theology developed beyond the level of the *Manual* description and missionary persuasions. Rev. Robert Chung, trained at Asbury College (from 1916 to 1925), seems to be the only Korean who had a clear sense of his own identity in the Church. He left behind some of his sermons and a basic theology, apparently based on Asbury's holiness theology, in a journal called "*Sunghwa*" (holy fire), which he issued for several years (1935-1937?). At that time he was a nationally known preacher and evangelist, who held meetings in tents and tabernacles. Even today, it is not easy to discern a distinctive identity of the Church, which is clearly Nazarene, except in its system and politics.

Ministerial education was weak in both size and quality. Although the Church was an international church, international quality education in theology and leadership were not attempted, in contrast to that available to leaders and theologians of other denominations. Unfortunately, mission policy failed to establish a system of self-support at an early stage. Furthermore, contextualization and the "three-self formula" were not seriously practiced

until the second stage of the Church. For too long the primary orientation of the Church was on missionaries rather than on the indigenous people.

Alternatives

During the 1970s and early '80s Korean Evangelical Holiness Churches gained considerable members, which indicates that the theology of holiness, which has strong affinities with that of the Nazarene Church, may work in Korean culture. Indeed, the Gospel of sanctification is universal, regardless of cultural differences. However, a contextualized theology of sanctification must be developed that is intrinsic to Korea for effective holiness ministry. The intratextual doctrine works in Korean culture; but if we were to develop a better, distinctively contextualized theology of sanctification, it would help us perform more effective holiness ministry. We cannot ignore the background culture, which contains aspects that are sometimes challenging to the doctrine, which demands a contextualization. Theology is missiological, as Stanley Grenz indicates, and it should go beyond the foundational theory of sanctification.

There should be an endeavor to shift from a sectarian to an open system of operation in the activities of the Church within a broader Christian context. If the Church has a shining and universally distinctive identity in which we have confidence, there should be no reluctance to open the door. A post-denominational approach opened people's eyes and provided positive ground for minority churches to grow through minimizing challenges of marginality. Korean theological schools began to open the door to share credits and exchange faculties for lectures and presentation of ideas. And Korean Nazarene University opened its doors to students from neighboring universities and evangelical theological schools. It is anticipated that isolated sectarian institutions may not exist in the 21st century,

and any closed solitary churches will not survive. We need a program of open theological education and of a dynamic church, while maintaining our distinctive identity as a Church.