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**Twelve Influential Early  
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## Twelve Influential Early Korean Preachers

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## Gil, Seon-Ju (1869-1935)

Kwan Ho Jung<sup>1</sup>

*If we as individuals do not repent after committing sins, peace would not come into our hearts. Even when there is fighting in the family and it seems like we have chased the unrighteous person out because it did not seem that the righteous one could win, true peace will not come into the family. The reason there are fights between nations is because either side is unrighteous. If the world relies on justice and humanity but then does not behave that way, I do not think peace will come hereafter. But either way, I say it again: I sincerely hope and wish that you pray before God and seek him through these words in Psalm 85:10, "Righteousness and peace kiss each other." - From The Dawn of Peace.<sup>2</sup>*

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### Introduction

Reverend Gil Seon-Ju is a very important figure in the history of the Korean church. He played a leading role in the Pyeongyang Revival of 1907.<sup>3</sup> Through the effect of this revival, the Korean church could develop dramatically into the church to which world churches also pay attention. He started the early-morning daily prayer meetings that affected the Korean Christians dramatically. He pastored Pyeongyang's Jangdaehyeon Church for twenty years, and delivered over twenty thousand sermons.<sup>4</sup> His sermons that contain the theology of imminent eschatology played a crucial role that enabled the Korean Christians to keep their faith during the time of Japanese colonialism.

### Life journey

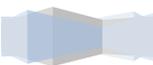
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<sup>2</sup> KIATS ed., *Gil Seon-Ju: Essential Writings* (Seoul: KIATS, 2008), 201.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 17.

<sup>4</sup> KIATS ed., *Gil Seon-Ju: Mansaseongchwi* (Seoul: KIATS, 2008), 15.



Reverend Gil Seon-Ju was born in 1869 in the city of Anju, Pyeong'an province.<sup>5</sup> The family was relatively well off, and he was able to study the classics. He was very intelligent, and when he was twelve years old, he wrote a sympathetic poem about a poverty-stricken woman. Until the age of 21, he was deeply interested in *seondo*<sup>6</sup> and other Eastern philosophies. However, as he met the missionary Samuel A. Moffett, he was introduced to Christianity. Inspired by John Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress* and other Christian books, he embraced the Christian faith and he was baptized at the age of 29.<sup>7</sup> When he was 30 years old, he became the *yeongsu*<sup>8</sup> of the Jangdaehyeon church. In 1901, at the age of 33 he was elected as an elder of the church. In 1903, he enrolled in the Pyeongyang Presbyterian Seminary and in 1907, became one among seven of Korea's first seminary graduates. In the following month, he became senior pastor of Jangdaehyeon Church.

### Reverend Gil Seon-Ju's Role in Korean church history

He was active from the 1890s to the 1930s, which were the founding years of the Korean church. As he planted six churches throughout the country and nurtured more than eight hundred pastors and elders, he helped develop the prototypes of today's Korean churches. He played a leading role in the Pyeongyang<sup>9</sup> Revival of 1907, a crucial event in the growth of the Korean church. And also he initiated the practice of early Morning Prayer services. It became one of the hallmarks of Korean Christianity. It is estimated that Rev. Gil delivered more than twenty thousand sermons, and his sermons were heard by over 380,000 people. He traveled about in Korea and China, leading revival meetings and Bible classes.<sup>10</sup>

He was not only a passionate leader and pastor, he was also deeply concerned about the fate of the Korean people and the circumstances of Japan's colonization of Korea at that time. His oldest son died from wounds sustained while being tortured under the Japanese regime, and he also acted as one of thirty-three peoples' representatives to initiate the Independence Proclamation of 1919. He was one of several good shepherds who proclaimed the hope and the comfort of a new age to his people in their time of oppression under the Japanese regime. He tried to give hope to a people sunk in despair through his lectures on the *Malsehak* (A Study of The End Times). He also had a passion for education. He started the neighborhood schools in Pandong, Pyeongyang in 1898, which grew into the Sungdeok and Sunghyeon Schools.

Reverend Gil Seon-Ju started the early Morning Prayer service in 1906 and developed the idea of praying aloud in one voice. He made Korean churches into a church of prayer. He also read through the Old Testament 30 times, the New Testament 100 times, 1 John more than

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<sup>5</sup> In what is now North Korea.

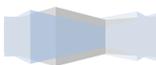
<sup>6</sup> *Seondo* is an Eastern mystical practice.

<sup>7</sup> KIATS ed., *Gil Seon-Ju: Mansaseongchwi* (Seoul: KIATS, 2008), 15.

<sup>8</sup> A leadership position in a church not yet officially institutionalized.

<sup>9</sup> In what is now North Korea.

<sup>10</sup> KIATS ed., *Gil Seon-Ju: Mansaseongchwi* (Seoul: KIATS, 2008), 15.



500 times and memorized the Revelation of John. In this way, the Bible was like a life force flowing in his body.

### **Dawn prayer**

Reverend Gil Seon-Ju started the early-morning daily prayer meetings in 1906.<sup>11</sup> In 1907, Rev. Gil Seon-Ju passed the law which approved the early-morning daily prayer meetings in his church. It is not exaggeration that Korean Christianity was able to establish due to this meeting.<sup>12</sup> Through this meeting, people were able to repent, and to pray for the personal moral change and for the Korean society. This meeting actually had an impact in changing the whole Korean society.

The early-morning daily prayer meetings in the early Korean churches had several important traits. Firstly, these meetings were never forced by missionaries. Secondly, Korean Christians attempted to pray for the country rather than for personal needs especially when they were facing difficult situations. Thirdly, regardless of their denominations, most Korean Christians participated in these early-morning daily prayer meetings. This was very helpful in uniting foreign missionaries and Korean Christians, and helped to unite different denominations among the Korean churches. Lastly, the early-morning daily prayer meetings helped Koreans to accept western Christianity in such a way that would best fit for Korean Christians. These days, the early-morning daily prayer meetings are one of the most particular and important practices of Korean Christianity.

### **The Great Revival of Pyeongyang**

The Great Revival of Pyeongyang is a very important event in the history of the Korean church. The most important man in this revival was the Reverend Gil Seon-Ju. The fire of the Holy Spirit fell upon the Jangdaehyeon Church on January 6, 1907. At that time, Rev. Gil Seon-Ju was leading a prayer. The entire congregation began to confessing their sins, and the dramatic movement of repentance took place on the spot. Headlines of prominent newspapers all over the world reported the great change of the Korean church and Korean people with the Holy Spirit. All newspapers praised the Korean church, declaring that the Korean church became a proper Christian church that could teach the churches of the world. At that time, the Korean church experienced such a manifestation of the Holy Spirit, and the Korean church became settled in its identity as “God’s church”.

### **Sermons and Theology**

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<sup>11</sup> KIATS ed., *Gil Seon-Ju: Essential Writings* (Seoul: KIATS, 2008), 15.

<sup>12</sup> KIATS ed., *Gil Seon-Ju: Mansaseongchwi* (Seoul: KIATS, 2008), 15.

The first impression that is shown in Reverend Gil Seon-Ju's sermons is that he seemed to show the theory of "universal redemption". He preached that Jesus was crucified for the whole of humanity consistently.

*Jesus carried the totality of death and the total weight of sin on the cross, and through that universal pain of being forsaken by god due to death and sin, he uttered the song and prayer of great shout and... The cry of "lamasabachtani" that took the place of all humankind's sin shook the entire universe!*<sup>13</sup>

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This inclination of universal redemption is shown in the following sermon:

*Jesus' death was not a death of one individual but the total pain of experiencing the death of all generations and all sinners, the death of all humanity; by enduring the death of countless people in one body, it was a universal death that took the place of all the forces of death.*<sup>14</sup>

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As he used the expressions of 'universal,' 'all humanity,' and 'all generations,' he seemed to be against the "limited atonement" of Calvinism, but his thought is that the redemption is not for all humanity but for the people who believe in Jesus as shown by these expressions "knowing Jesus is the way to gain life" and "...believe the cross and gain the sure effect of salvation."

If so, why is this kind of contradiction found? The answer is that he had the fundamental tendency which interprets Bible literally. He preached surely that people can get salvation by believing in Jesus. His preaching that the redemption of Jesus reaches the whole of humanity means that every person can believe in Jesus without discrimination. That is, even though the contribution of Jesus' redemption is enough to atone for the sins of the of whole humanity, it doesn't mean that he supported universal redemption.<sup>15</sup>

### ***Confess hidden sins and pray***

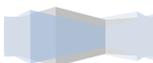
Reverend Gil Seon-Ju said that everything that is illegal in the Bible is a sin. He also preached that knowing how to behave in righteousness and not doing so is a sin, and not being obedient, and all conduct aside from faith are all sin. He thought that all people as well as Christians had a sinful nature which made sure that all people continued to sin actually. The feature of his opinion about sin is that he thought of two types of sins: general sins and hidden sins. In his opinion, general sins are small sins only superficially and hidden sins are the sins deep inside a back room. He said that the general sins can be forgiven by praying and repentance with human's free will,

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<sup>13</sup> KIATS ed., *Gil Seon-Ju: Essential Writings* (Seoul: KIATS, 2008), 57.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 55.

<sup>15</sup> <http://www.amennews.com/news/articlePrint.html?idxno=7856>



but the hidden sins can be forgiven only by activities of the Holy Spirit. Thus confession of these hidden sins in front of the church played very important roles in the Pyongyang Revival of 1907 in Korea. One problem in his opinion, however, is that activities of the Holy Spirit were limited to the hidden sins. It is from accepting the free will of human considerably.<sup>16</sup>

***Imminent eschatology***

One of the important teachings in his sermons is imminent eschatology. He emphasized that the Lord's second coming must be imminent.

*The five wise virgins were prepared.... Even if you look simply at this parable, we see that his believers must always be prepared since Jesus will not come late.... It does not evangelize, nor does it even pray. Rather, evangelism or prayer is being disdained by the believers of Shinto. Who will go against it and say it does not apply to the prophecy in Isaiah 60 that.... That is why believers must look and carefully examine it biblically, or watch the omens of the times and hope in the Lord's second coming while being alert and praying.<sup>17</sup>*

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He warned that there are many believers who consider the second coming to be beyond their wildest dreams, and also criticized that many churches got involved in movements and business; as a result, they became secularized day by day.

His emphasis on imminent eschatology is from soteriological awareness to keep faith. This imminent eschatology that emphasizes Jesus' second coming encouraged movements of conservative belief and theology that focus on individual apocalyptic belief and a guiding principle in Christian's life. He emphasized individual salvation by private repentance and revival.<sup>18</sup> He also preached that people can get salvation by believing in Jesus as God and this salvation can confirm hope for next life, that is, heaven for Christians. Furthermore, he reached to the conclusion that Christians should live within Jesus Christ without compromise with the reality of everyday life. Thus because individual salvation that he insisted contains both mundane and apocalyptic dimension, it can be said that his individual salvation may play a role as the link between soteriology and eschatology in Korean church history. In the history of the Korean church, this imminent eschatology was also a significant aspect of faith. Especially in 1910, under the time of Japanese colonialism, it deeply influenced and motivated the Christians of the Korean church to overcome this challenge.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> <http://www.amennews.com/news/articlePrint.html?idxno=7856>

<sup>17</sup> KIATS ed., *Gil Seon-Ju: Essential Writings* (Seoul: KIATS, 2008), 80.

<sup>18</sup> <http://blog.chosun.com/blog.log.view.screen?logId=334600&userId=gogli>

<sup>19</sup> KIATS ed., *Gil Seon-Ju: Essential Writings* (Seoul: KIATS, 2008), 81.

## Principle works

Reverend Gil Seon-Ju worked with unusual energy and left behind numerous works and sermons, offering a look into his theology and faith. Nineteen of these sermons were compiled and published by Choi In-Hwa in 1941 in a volume titled *The Sermons of Reverend Gil Seon-Ju*.<sup>20</sup> Many of his sermons and sermon outlines were compiled into *Gangdae Bogam (A Pulpit Handbook)*, which became the model of outline-based sermon creation for countless Korean pastors. *A Study of the End Times*, appropriate to the somber circumstances of Gil's era, has been an important work on eschatology throughout the Korean Protestant church's history. As if reflecting the role of John Bunyan's work in influencing the germination of the Korean church, Reverend Gil used his distinctive approach to the pilgrim's progress in his works *Sloth* and *Mansaseongchwi (The Attainment of All Things)*.<sup>21</sup> In particular, it demonstrates symbolically how Christianity and Korean sensibilities were combined to fit a context in which there were not yet many Christians. Rev. Gil Seon-Ju's work allows us to infer a likeness of the early Korean Church, the growth of which has been unparalleled in the twentieth century.

### *Mansaseongchwi (The Attainment of All Things)*

This work was based on a book, entitled *Sloth* which he wrote in 1901.<sup>22</sup> In *The Attainment of All Things*, he supplemented the content of *Sloth* with *sijo*, composed of five- and seven- syllable lines, revealing Rev. Gil's literary side.<sup>23</sup> This book is composed of twenty-eight chapters. In *The Attainment of All Things*, he might have an intention that the power of this book would eradicate the enemy sloth and create in our people the conception of hard work by stating clearly his hope that "the brothers and sisters who see this book will meditate on its meaning and avoid the evil of sloth, thereby achieving their lives' work during their lifetime on earth and eventually enjoying eternal bliss" in chapter one. In this book, he describes in story form from the progression from the city of Wishes to the Kingdom of Eternal Life. The story showed several characteristics particular to Rev. Gil's style. First, he presents simple explanations of Christian concepts as providing a clear representation of Jesus as God incarnate. Second, he takes Asian concepts familiar to his fellow Koreans of the time and links them to Bible verses that are unfamiliar to the people of the time. Third, using lots of symbols, he explains sloth and warns against its temptations and evils. Rev. Gil's *The Attainment of All Things* demonstrates the influence of *The Pilgrim's Progress* on the formation of the early Korean Protestant church. Particularly, he combined Christianity and Korean sensibilities symbolically to fit a context in which there were not yet many Christians in Korea.

## Conclusion

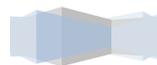
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<sup>20</sup> KIATS ed., *Gil Seon-Ju: Mansaseongchwi* (Seoul: KIATS, 2008), 16.

<sup>21</sup> <http://jbjoon63.blog.me/30096662769>

<sup>22</sup> The English title is *Indolence*.

<sup>23</sup> *Sijo* refers to a genre of Korean poetry.



As we have seen, Reverend Gil Seon-Ju was a foundation stone of the Korean church. He was deeply involved in the traditional Korean religious practice of *Seondo*, but he became a foundation stone in the history of Korean churches. He played an important role in the Pyeongyang Revival of 1907, a crucial event in the growth of the Korean church. He made the important framework of Korean faith and piety based on prayer and the Bible. He also participated in the foundation of the Independence Movement. He was truly a leading figure of the first generation of the Korean Protestant church. By his faith, his preaching, his orthodoxy, the Korean church could develop into a world church. He was the greatest pastor and theologian of his time. Through his works, Korean Christians could see clearly what Christianity is. He also showed that the Christian gospel is not merely a matter of heaven after death, but that it has actual relevance to the issues of all people at this very moment.

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