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**Twelve Influential Early
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Twelve Influential Early Korean Preachers

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Ju, Gi-Cheol (1897-1944)

Giuk Choe¹

*Why are we Christians hesitating to abandon our lives for the Lord...?
Why should we remain firm to the end in obedience to God's
commandments, confronting the idolatry of the Shinto shrine at the cost of
our lives? Without question, it is because of the idea of God-centeredness."*²

Introduction

The Reverend Ju Gi-Cheol is one of the greatest martyrs which the Korean church has ever produced. Rev. Ju became influential in the theological and faithful life of the Korean church in the wake of the Independence Movement of Korea, shaping the history and belief of the Korean church, the understanding of the relationship between church and state, and the model of resistance to unjust powers. His life was a clear illustration of what one must follow and what one must resist. He left a permanent mark on the Korean church regarding the "reality of martyrdom-faith."³ In that sense, this paper will consider his life and theological thoughts by historical materials and his sermons.

Life Journey

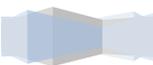
Ju Gi-Cheol was born on November 25, 1897. He was the fourth child of seven brothers and sisters by elder Ju Hyun-Sung in Woongchun in Kyungnam Province.⁴ In 1913, he entered Osan School in Jeongju. This school was founded for nationalist education and here, Ju Gi-Cheol learned of faith, patriotism, and nationalism from such respected leaders of the people as Jo Man-Sik and Yi Seung-Hun. After spending three years at the school, he entered Yeonhee School, but he had to drop out of the program because of an eye disease. He then spent four-and-

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² In-Seo Kim, *History of Rev. Ju's martyrdom and his sermons collection* (Seoul: Life of Faith, 1958), 11.

³ Sang-Gyoo Lee, "Reverend Ju Gi-Cheol: The Man who loved only God for his lifetime," in KIATS ed., *Ju Gi-Cheol: Essential Writings* (Seoul: KIATS, 2008), 13-14.

⁴ Jong Teack Oh, "The roots of Puritanism in the Korean Presbyterian Church," Ph.D. Thesis, University of Pretoria, 2007, 129.



a-half years in hopelessness and frustration until he attended a revival meeting led by Kim Ik-Du in Munchang Church in Masan, Gyeongnam province. He had a significant religious experience at the meeting and proceeded to pursue ministry. He entered the Presbyterian Seminary in Pyeongyang in March of 1922. He graduated in September of 1925 and ministered at Choryang Church in Busan (1926-1931), Munchang Church in Masan (1931-1936), and Sanjeonghyeon Church in Pyeongyang (1936-1944).⁵

He took the lead in the movement against Shinto shrine worship. He was ministering at Sanjeonghyeon Church when he first got involved in the controversy surrounding Shinto shrine worship. Upon his first apprehension in February of 1938 – Pyeongyang Presbytery, which he belong to, approved of Shinto shrine worship in September, 1938 – he was imprisoned for seven years with the charge of disturbing the order and continued his resistance therein.⁶ He suffered incarceration and brutal torture four times for a total of about seven years.⁷ When he was imprisoned for the fourth time, the Pyeongyang Presbytery cancelled the pastoral license of Reverend Ju Gi-Cheol and closed down Sanjeonghyeon Church which stood as the symbol of resistance against Shinto shrine worship. Ju Gi-Cheol was martyred on the night of April 21, 1944 in a prison.⁸

Theology and Sermons

God-centered Theology

The sermons of Ju reflected his theological thoughts as well as the philosophy of his ministry. “His sermons were his confessions, his life, and his spirit sealed by his blood.”⁹ One of the most remarkable ideas shown in his sermons was the “God-centered” theology. On September 1, 1936, he preached on the subject of *Ilsagako* (the mind not to be scared of even death) at the Pyeongyang Theological Seminary. He emphasized three points. First of all, be ready to die for following Jesus. Secondly, be ready to die for leading other souls to Jesus. Thirdly, be ready to die for witnessing the truth of the resurrection.

Shall we live after denying Jesus? Alternatively, shall we die to follow Jesus? It is a real death to deny the true Jesus, while to die for Jesus means to live in the real sense of the Word. The time when Jesus was welcomed has past; now it is the time of persecution and suffering; let anyone who does not want to follow Jesus, go! But all those who are willing to follow Jesus are required to deny themselves.... Why are we Christians hesitating to abandon our lives for the Lord...? Why should we remain firm to the end in

⁵ Sang-Gyoo Lee, “Reverend Ju Gi-Cheol: The Man who loved only God for his lifetime,” 15-16.

⁶ Jong Teack Oh, “The roots of Puritanism in the Korean Presbyterian Church,” 130.

⁷ According to Sang-Gyoo Lee, 16, his period of confinement is as follows: from February to June 1938 (first imprisonment); from August 1938 to February 1939 (second imprisonment); from August 1939 to April 1940 (third imprisonment); from August 1940 to April 21, 1944 when he was martyred (fourth imprisonment).

⁸ Sang-Gyoo Lee, “Reverend Ju Gi-Cheol: The Man who loved only God for his lifetime,” 16.

⁹ In-Seo Kim, *History of Rev. Ju's martyrdom and his sermons collection* (Seoul: Life of Faith, 1958), 11.

obedience to God's commandments, confronting the idolatry of the Shinto shrine at the cost of our lives? Without question, it is because of the idea of God-centeredness.¹⁰

Ju's theology of "God-Centeredness" was based upon the idea that we Christians should be ready to die to keep the first commandment. In other words, it would be "the idea of God's honor" because the reason we keep the first commandment is to glorify the Creator God.¹¹ God was always the center of Ju's sermons. The reason that he could die a martyr to God is his "God-centered" faith. He was a man who loved God "fervently."¹² His burning love for God is reflected in the following sermon, "Love God Fervently."

If you look at all the prophecies, they are also the expression of fervent love towards God. The reason all the prophets admonished people with a righteous anger like fire is that people were not awake, had no fear or sincerity, and did not have fervent love towards God...Though there are a few churches around, how many do you think are there who fervently love God among the billions of church members around the world?...If God does not exist, then we must go and become atheists! But if God truly exists, then we must serve him with all our hearts and serve him with fervent love!¹³

Theology of Shinto Shrine Worship Opposition

The great heritage of Ju's life comes from his opposition to and resistance against the enforcement of Shinto shrine worship. This orientation not only determined the direction of his pastoral life but eventually formed the Ju Gi-Cheol model of martyrdom. His life and ministry run parallel to the Japanese colonial rule in Korea and its policy on religion, especially its policy towards Christianity and the subsequent persecution against the Korean church. The evangelistic faith he came to espouse truly became a source of vitality and energy that sustained him through his life.

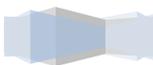
Theologically, Ju was a strict conservative and evangelical who believed the Bible was inspired by the Holy Spirit and he adhered faithfully to the tradition and polity of the Presbyterian Church. These convictions shaped the theological basis by which he opposed Shinto shrine worship. The reason why he opposed Shinto shrine worship can be summarized in three points. First of all, he considered Shinto shrine worship as idolatry and thus contrary to God's commandment. For him, to worship at the Shinto shrine was to break the first and second commandments. This is the most essential reason he opposed it. Second, he thought that Shinto

¹⁰ Ibid., 14-15.

¹¹ Kyu-Chul Chung, "Orthodox reformed theology and the challenge of contemporary conservative theology," *Shinhak Jinam* 70, (Seoul, 2003), 225.

¹² Gi-Cheol Ju, "Love God Fervently," in KIATS ed., *Ju Gi-Cheol: Essential Writings* (Seoul: KIATS, 2008), 64.

¹³ Ibid., 63-67.



shrine worship was an oppression of the individual's freedom of conscience and religion. Third, he opposed it in order to keep "the purity and holiness of the church." To him, the continuous oppression by Japanese colonial rule was ultimately aimed at destroying the Korean church. Thus Ju fought in order to preserve freedom of religion and spiritual liberty as well as to maintain purity of faith and the holiness of the church.¹⁴ Thus, his faith could not be compatible with Shinto shrine worship. His last sermon before he died for his Christian belief was "My Prayer: Five Supplications" based on Matthew 5:18 and Romans 8:18 and 31-39. This showed his feelings against Shinto worship.

I am on the verge of death. The dark hand that seeks my life draws close every minute. Facing death, I cannot but pray for the strength to overcome its power. Every living thing laments before death and every human life trembles in fear and grieves before it. The power of death seems to be the devil's most powerful weapon in threatening human beings. How many people have forsaken righteousness for fear of death, and how many people abandoned their faith in order to save themselves from it?... O, my Lord! Permit me not to defile the Lord's name by cherishing this life. Let me keep the Lord's commandments even if this body shall break and become dust... Since you died for me, how can I pretend not to know you because I fear death!... O Pyeongyang! O Pyeongyang! My Jerusalem of the East, the Land of Courtesy!¹⁵ Glory has left you... I shall give, I shall give this small life to the Lord. Sword, do you wait for me! I shall go forth to you.¹⁶

After Korea's independence from Japan, a Christian newspaper reported about the persecution of Korean Christians opposing Shinto shrine worship as follows:

From 1938-1945, about 2000 Christians were arrested for their refusal to practice Shinto worship, and about 50 people died in prison for their faith. Rev. Ju Gi-Cheol (1897-1944) of Pyeongyang was one of the 50 martyrs.¹⁷

Eschatology

The contents of his sermons have "apocalyptic" characteristics. His sermons are full of the conviction of the cross and the resurrection. His sermons show the hope which comes from the cross and resurrection, and this permeates his faith.

This road of the cross is the road our Lord had taken. If you are willing to meet the Lord you must take this road. Also, this road is the one on which

¹⁴ Sang-Gyoo Lee, "Reverend Ju Gi-Cheol: The Man who loved only God for his lifetime," 20.

¹⁵ In those days, Pyeongyang was called Jerusalem of the East after the Pyeongyang Great Revival in 1907.

¹⁶ Gi-Cheol Ju, "My prayer: Five Supplications," in KIATS ed., *Ju Gi-Cheol: Essential Writings*, 157-170.

¹⁷ Jong Teack Oh, "The roots of Puritanism in the Korean Presbyterian Church," 132.

*you walk with the Lord. This road is the one on which you walk with the Lord. He said, "Carry your cross and follow me," so the road of the cross is the one Jesus took...Let us overcome the persons that we are and carry our own crosses and follow Jesus who is the way of life. May we receive the eternal Holy Spirit as we walk with the Lord by living piously.*¹⁸

*Those who go the Lord's path of the cross will reign with our Lord. But they will not be able to avoid pain in the world of the Devil. The world is constantly running towards the end. As a result the devotion of many people is cooling down...We must be awake, see that the road of the cross is open to us, regain our confidence, and walk that road with joy. Let us remember that the road we walk is not the one that people of the world take. The road of the cross! That is our road.*¹⁹

Moreover, his sermons show a clear understanding of life and death. This perspective of life and death not only deals with the problems of human morality and finitude, but more importantly it delineates the attitude of a faithful life in its entirety. This commitment enabled him to fight until martyrdom and resist against the unjust interference of national power. His sermon, "Preparing for Death," reflects his apocalyptic hope of heaven.

*Why do we fear death? We fear death because we are worried about the punishment that follows it...You will enter into heaven if you live your life in fear of God, and you will go to hell if you live in prodigality solely to fill your own stomach...There is no comfort but only sadness if you go the road of hopelessness. Believers will meet each other in heaven to serve the Lord and live in glory, and they will rejoice when they think of their sinless condition.*²⁰

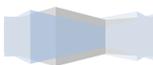
Conclusion

Reverend Ju Gi-Cheol, who could be compared to the early Christian martyrs under great persecution by Rome, resisted and fought against the power of Japanese Imperialism in order to keep his faith and the holiness of the church. Throughout his life in his sermons, ministry, and opposition to Shinto shrine worship, he demonstrated the way of a true Christian who does not fear even death in order to obey God. Eventually, he went the path of a martyr for the glory of God. The driving force for his actions was essentially love for God. His faithful life illustrated what is loving God "with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might" (Deut 6:5, NRSV).

¹⁸ Gi-Cheol Ju, "Let us walk the way of the Cross," in KIATS ed., *Ju Gi-Cheol: Essential Writings*, 46-47.

¹⁹ Gi-Cheol Ju, "A prayer towards the Cross," in KIATS ed., *Ju Gi-Cheol: Essential Writings*, 52-53.

²⁰ Gi-Cheol Ju, "Preparing for Death," in KIATS ed., *Ju Gi-Cheol: Essential Writings*, 56-58.



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