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**Twelve Influential Early
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Twelve Influential Early Korean Preachers

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Lee, Seong-Bong (1900-1965)

Chanmi Park¹

*“You had five husbands, and the man you have now is not your husband.”
Then for the first time ever, she started to feel guilty for her sinful life and
she turned around and counted her fingers: there was man called Kim² who
would spend money extravagantly,
a man named Jee who had immense knowledge,
a man named Moon who was gifted in writing,
a man called Kwon who had fine power and influence,
and a man named Huh who was profligate.
As she actually counted the number of husbands whom she had lived within
the past she could not help but bow her head before Jesus who had looked
through her mind.³*

Introduction

The Reverend Lee, Seong-Bong (1900-1965) is a central figure who led the flow of the spirituality of Korean Christians in the middle of the 20th century and following. He is often called “the Moody of Korean Christianity.”⁴ He led the revival movement, and became the representative revivalist for the whole Korean Protestant church.⁵ He was a Holiness pastor, but his work was not limited to the Holiness Church. He went and served the small churches and the poor people. He ministered not only at orphanages and leper communities, but also at police headquarters and military bases. He also organized “the Immanuel Special Force” who moved and led together the meeting and worship services.⁶ His speech was very powerful to the people at that time, since he added his own stories, and it reflected their folk life. His preaching always included songs whose words were rewritten by Lee himself. Also, he loved to give examples and

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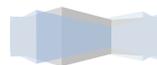
² Each last name represents a type of man. Kim (金) means gold; a rich man, Jee(智) means wisdom; a wise man, Moon(文) means letters; a intelligent man, Kwon(權) means power; a powerful man, and Huh(虛) means a bluff; a swashbuckler.

³ Seong-Bong Lee, “Brightening the Eyes of the Samaritan Woman,” in KIATS ed., *Lee, Seong-Bong: Essential Writings* (Seoul: KIATS, 2008), 139.

⁴ KIATS ed., *Myeongsimdo Ganghwa: The Discourse on the Myeongsimdo* (Seoul: KIATS, 2009), 15

⁵ KIATS ed., *Lee, Seong-Bong: Essential Writings* (Seoul: KIATS, 2008), 14.

⁶ KIATS ed., *Myeongsimdo Ganghwa: The Discourse on the Myeongsimdo* (Seoul: KIATS, 2009), pp15-16



explanation with the books which allowed the people to understand easily such as *Cheollo Yeokjeong Ganghwa*, which means “The Discourse on the Pilgrim’s Progress” and *Myeongsimdo Ganghwa*, “The Discourse of Myeongsimdo”, and *Myeongsimdo* (明心圖) means “The Drawings of the Bright Heart.” The two books were originally introduced from the western world, but they were re-written by Lee including his unique and powerful messages and easily approachable explanations.

Historical Background

When Seong-Bong was young, Korea was under the Japanese forced occupation (1910-1945). Korea had had political turmoil through the late 19th century to the early 20th century from the end of the Joseon dynasty to the Republic of Korea while passing the period of the Korean Empire and Japanese Imperial Period.

However, that was also the time that Christianity was spreading into Korea. Missionaries from the western countries came to Korea, and with the evangelical movement, they built schools and hospitals. In 1907, there was a Great Revival Movement at Pyongyang. About 1,000 people had a series of meetings on the teaching of the work of Holy Spirit. In the unstable period, the revival moments had continued through the spiritual leaders such as Rev. Gil Seon-Ju, Rev. Kim Ik-Du, and Rev. Lee Seong-Bong.

On the other hand, it was a period to be challenged to hold the faith for Christians since the suppression from the Japanese Imperial forces was getting stronger upon them. There were many new converts, while at the same time some people became apostates when they were threatened by the Japanese force.

Life Journey

Rev. Lee Seong-Bong was born on July 4, 1900, in Gangdong County, South Pyeongan Province. He explained that his parents were commoners and low-class sinners.⁷ When his mother began to attend a church, the family became Christians when Seong-Bong was six years old. In his youth, he spent most of time working in their family orchard. His attention was only to make money. Leaving behind his mother’s encouragement, he was skipping church attendance on Sundays.⁸

One Sunday, when Seong-Bong was on his way home from the market, all of sudden, his legs began to hurt, and his right leg collapsed, and that time he was 21 years old. The experience led him to realize his own brokenness, and then he went through the repentance of sins in his life.⁹ In 1925, he entered Gyeongseong Bible School, and he described that the three years was like “being shaped in a furnace”¹⁰ There he learned the essence of Christian faith through the teaching of Rev. Lee Myeong-Jik. After graduating, he started his ministry as a pastor from

⁷ KIATS ed., *Lee, Seong-Bong: Essential Writings* (Seoul: KIATS, 2008), 16.

⁸ KIATS ed., *Myeongsimdo Ganghwa [The Discourse on the Myeongsimdo]* (Seoul: KIATS, 2009), 15.

⁹ KIATS ed., *Lee, Seong-Bong: Essential Writings* (Seoul: KIATS, 2008), 17.

¹⁰ *Ibid*, 17.

Mokpo to many other locations. In the 1930s Lee was appointed as a nationwide itinerating revivalist to resolve the problem of division crisis in the Holiness Church. He traveled the entire country, and led revival meetings while embracing all the denominations. When the Japanese authorities attempted to suppress his ministry, he even traveled to Manchuria to minister. After Korea's liberation, he came to Pyeongan Province in 1945, and later he traveled south to rebuild churches.¹¹

Sermons and Theology

Lee's core message was focused on the four gospel principles which were emphasized by the Holiness Church: rebirth, holiness, healing, and the second coming. It was also common throughout Korea in the revival moment period. He expressed well the popular Christianity which has been central to evangelicalism in Korea.¹² Also his messages came from his personal experiences, which made them more powerful. He loved to preach with stories which made the audience more approachable to the message.

Repentance of Rebirth

His speech begins with the confession of sins since his life journey had been started with his experience of the confession and the rebirth. Rev. Kim Ik-Du also emphasized the importance of repentance, and Lee was influenced by him. Lee said without repentance there would be no experience of rebirth and the baptism of Holy Spirit.¹³

When the light of the Holy Spirit embraces a heart, all wickedness is driven away in one's anguish and repentance. It is not a sinner that goes to hell, but it is the unrepentant that goes to hell. Repentance is the foundation of salvation and entrance to heaven. A believer once said repentance is another definition for innocence and another word for progress. Repentance is God's mandate and a condition for receiving the Holy Spirit.¹⁴

Lee also liked to share his experience about repentance. This story appears several times in his sermons. It shows what it is like to repent, and how the life of the person could be changed through it.

One night, while I was sleeping beside an assistant pastor, he abruptly poked me through my blanket. I woke up from my sleep and asked him what was

¹¹ KIATS ed., *Myeongsimdo Ganghwa: The Discourse on the Myeongsimdo* (Seoul: KIATS, 2009), 15.

¹² KIATS ed., *Lee, Seong-Bong: Essential Writings* (Seoul: KIATS, 2008), 16.

¹³ Lee, Deok-Sik, *The Revival Sermons and the Central Message*, p6 from <http://www.sungbong.org/Data/sb-treatise.htm>

¹⁴ Lee, Seong-Bong, KIATS ed., *Myeongsimdo Ganghwa: The Discourse on the Myeongsimdo* (Seoul: KIATS, 2009), 44.



the matter, and he replied, "Pastor, it says Peter repented when he heard the rooster cry, right? I will repent too." Then I said, "You mean, as an assistant pastor, you still have not yet repented?" He lamented, "Even though I've repented of the little things, I still have embarrassing secrets I cannot easily talk about. Pastor, I can't sleep at all at night, and I can't stand thinking about that sin." So as we prayed together waking up from our sleep, assistant pastor poured out all his hidden sin. When he disclosed the unspeakable secret sins, I was truly thankful to the Lord.¹⁵

Lee said to people that you should repent when the chances are given to you. He never talked that a sinner cannot go to the kingdom of God, but a person who does not repent will despair, he said.¹⁶ Thus, for him, the most significant thing is to repent no matter how was your life before.

The Holy Life

He also emphasized the holy life after the rebirth. That was the central message of Holiness Church and the revival movement. His point was once a person has experienced the rebirth, the new life should be continued through the holy life. He said since the spirit of Christ is holy, you are not able to see him if you are not holy. That means if you are in the Spirit the Spirit will lead you to the holy life. Holiness is the command over the earth from God, it is also the will of the Father, and it is the right to be the citizen of Heaven.¹⁷

The day of the Lord will come like a thief, so what kind of person ought you to be? The passage, the day of the Lord coming like a thief, can be analyzed in two ways. ... First, it means that we do not know when he will come....Furthermore, to come like a thief means that He will be taking the righteous believers, the valuable believers, and the good believers. When a thief comes, does he steal something like old diapers? He will take precious items such as gold rings and fine Jeogori [a Korean style coat or jacket].¹⁸

He asked what person we should be to be Christ's Bride in this message. Only a prepared and holy person can be used as a vessel that God uses nobly.¹⁹ He said "Now is the time of God's favor, now is the day of salvation" (2 Corinthians 6:2), and tomorrow is the Devil's day.²⁰

¹⁵ Lee, Seong-Bong "Let us Love the Lord," in KIATS ed., *Lee, Seong-Bong: Essential Writings* (Seoul: KIATS, 2008), 42.

¹⁶ Video Recording by Min, Kyeong-Bae, *The Illumination of the Revival Movement of Rev. Seong-Bong Lee* (<http://www.sungbong.org/chapel/VODlist.htm>)

¹⁷ Lee, Seong-Bong "The Gospel of Holiness," in KIATS ed., *Lee, Seong-Bong: Essential Writings* (Seoul: KIATS, 2008), 112.

¹⁸ Lee, Seong-Bong "The Holy Life," in KIATS ed., *Lee, Seong-Bong: Essential Writings* (Seoul: KIATS, 2008), 75-76.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 114.

...Then a very old demon in the far corner of the room stood up and called out the president of the demons, suggesting, "Why would it be so difficult when there is a uniquely clever scheme to put souls into hell? Aren't there words like, 'tomorrow,' 'later,' and 'next time'? Humans like to use these words the most and they find them comforting." At that moment, the demons unanimously agreed.

While he emphasized the second coming, he preached to the Christians in Korea to receive grace and open their mouth to confess their sins, to testify of God's grace, and to yearn with affection.²¹

The Way of the Cross

His message was centered to the cross and the grace from the cross. He said, we shall be melted by the true love of the cross of atonement: always boast of the cross with praises of thanksgiving. We shall nail the self-centeredness of our past, present and future onto the cross and bury it.

I went back to my home village for the first time in many years as I heard the sad news that my mother had passed away. However, as the promised revival assembly date with the Manchurian church approached, I barely rested one night at home and had to leave early the next day. ...I arrived in Pyongyang and went to see my young daughters who were studying at someone else's house. ... I inevitably needed to leave, and rose up abruptly,...When I looked at their appearance as they followed me, dragging sneakers with torn off heels, revealing reddish skin through the various holes in their socks, and wrapping their ears with torn-off towels instead of wearing warm furry hats.²²

Like this, he denied himself, while following the cross. He could not attend when his mother passed away, even though he got the message on time. He could not take care of his family, since he was leading many revival meetings. Rather, he talked about being joyful and grateful because of suffering, since small joy comes from small sufferings, and great joy comes from great suffering. Just like thorns prevent a child to pluck the lilies, the hardships and trials surrounded the believers are the hedges of God's love which protects the believers.²³

His Works

²⁰ Ibid., 125.

²¹ Ibid., 130.

²² Lee, Seong-Bong "Following the Lord," in KIATS ed., *Lee, Seong-Bong: Essential Writings* (Seoul: KIATS, 2008), 69.

²³ Ibid., 81.



During his lifetime, Lee published five volumes of his works.

Volume one, *Mallo Mothamyeon Jugeumeuro* [If Not by Words, Then By Death]

Volume Two, *Sarangeui Gangdan* [Pulpit of Love]

Volume Three, *Immanuel Gangdan* [Immanuel Pulpit]

Volume Four, *Bucheungui Bigyeol* [Secrets of Revival]

Volume Five, *Cheollo Yeokjeong Ganghwa* [The Discourse on the Pilgrim's Progress],
Myeongsimdo Ganghwa [The Discourse on the Myeongsimdo], *Yonaseo Ganghwa* [The
Discourse on the Book of Jonah]²⁴

Vol. 1 is his autobiographical sketch. Also the phrase *If Not by Words, Then By Death* is well known which reflects his ministry and sermons. Vol. 2 to 4 includes his sermons, and the whole texts are found in his website in Korean text.²⁵ He liked to use some stories and examples from his compiled books. Here is an example.

*If you read The Pilgrim's Progress, Christian meets three sleepyheads on his way. Their names are Ignorance, Slothful, and Heedless. When Christian asked, "Ignorance, how can you sleep so much in such a dangerous place?" he answered, "Dangerous? What's so dangerous? ...Christian said again, "Slothful, get up!" Then Slothful replied idling, "Awww, let me sleep just a little longer." ...Heedless replied, "Hey you! Why don't you worry about yourself rather than someone else?" and continued to sleep. In today's church, you can divide sleepyheads into three general types. They sleep like Ignorance because they do not know; they sleep like Slothful, for they are indolent; they sleep like Heedless, for they are complacent.*²⁶

The Characteristic of His Messages

Telling His Story

He did not hesitate telling his own story in the pulpit, since he passed the process of rebirth, there was no shame talking about his past, and that was his testimony. That made his sermons easier to listen to and more approachable to the audience.

Singing Songs

His songs include his theology and his message. By using well known tunes, he added his own words to the songs, and sang with the people during his sermon at the revival meetings and

²⁴ KIATS ed., *Myeongsimdo Ganghwa: The Discourse on the Myeongsimdo* (Seoul: KIATS, 2009), 16.

²⁵ <http://www.sungbong.org/revival/revival.htm>

²⁶ Lee, Seong-Bong "The Second Coming," in KIATS ed., *Lee, Seong-Bong: Essential Writings* (Seoul: KIATS, 2008), 161.

worship services. He published *Immanuel Sungga* [The Collection of Immanuel Songs] which was the collection of the songs for which Lee had been re-written the words.

*The lily beneath the mountain, Bright morning star,
The lily in the thorn field, How beautiful and precious!
Jesus, my Lord, Come into my heart.
With only you, my Lord, I am satisfied.*²⁷

His favorite songs are kept and recorded in his website.²⁸

Using Stories and Examples

As an example of *Cheollo Yeokjeong Ganghwa* above, he liked to give stories for the understanding of audience. *Myeongsimdo Ganghwa* is one of the books he liked to use. It is a book that uses graphic illustrations to depict the spiritual life of a believer from rebirth to death. The original other of the book is J. E. Gossner (1773-1858), and it was translated by William Baird during the early years of the Korean Protestantism. Gossner was a Catholic priest, but he was excommunicated and became a Lutheran pastor. It was also translated into Malayan, the West African language of Tshi, English, Chinese, and finally Korean. Chinese and Korean texts have a very different structure from the original version. Especially, Lee added his explanation with his own words in each chapter, and added songs at the end and in between.²⁹

Conclusion

While I was reading and listening to his messages, I found out that some of the stories and metaphors are those with which I have been very familiar. I could see how powerful his influence was and is through his experience. The reasons why people gave their attention to him is he answered God's calling sincerely, and talked to us how he was following Jesus and how we could do so as well. Also, he loved his people very much by approaching them with all the tools he could bring.

Since he was very influential upon modern Korean Christianity, his simple and easy message models are still found in churches, and it brings some criticism about Lee and his message. He is represented the form of message "Jesus to heaven, and unbelief to hell," which means if you believe, you are saved and will be in heaven, but if not, you cannot be saved.

However, I believe, thanks to his Christ-centered message, the Christians in Korea could go through the political turmoil and the hardship, and could keep their faith. His powerful messages have held the spirituality of Korean Christians. Even though, he was not a great theologian, or one that gave us an intellectual message, he should be remembered again by the

²⁷ Ibid., 81.

²⁸ <http://www.sungbong.org>

²⁹ KIATS ed., *Myeongsimdo Ganghwa: The Discourse on the Myeongsimdo* (Seoul: KIATS, 2009), 16-20.



Christians in this age, because his way of life and messages shows that he was the one of the sincere followers of Jesus.

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