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**Twelve Influential Early
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Twelve Influential Early Korean Preachers

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Kim, Gyo-Shin (1901-1945)

Hyoung Gu Yang¹

*Seongseo Joseon! You shall go to the house of Israel; do not pass through the hand of so-called established Christian; shake dirt off from your shoes at the door of the house whose owner worships foreign missionary more than the Christ and value a church building more than the Bible. Seongseo Joseon! You shall go to Koreans who have Korean spirit rather than to so-called established Christians! Go to countryside, to mountain villages; make it your mission to comfort a woodcutter. Seongseo Joseon! If you have so much patience, wait for Koreans born after the date your initial issue was published, and talk to them, discuss with them; why shall I heave a sigh of despair just because we are to meet fellow thinkers after a century is passed?*²

The Life of Kim Gyo-Sin and Historical Background

Kim Gyo-Sin was born on April 18, 1901 into a distinguished Confucian family in Hambeung, South Hamgyeong Province. Having graduated from Hamheung Public Agricultural School in March of 1919, he participated in the March 1st Liberation Movement that year. His experience in that movement would have been an occasion in which he newly recognized himself as a Joseon person.³ Years later, he went to Japan to enter the Tokyo Advanced Teaching School. At this stage, he agonized over the decision between the Confucian way of self-cultivation and Christian salvation as a means to achieve self-perfection. He was finally baptized and converted in June of 1920 at a Holiness church in Tokyo. But disappointed at the conflict in his church, he left it in November 1920. While in a state of inner turmoil, he started to attend Uchimura Kanzo's Scripture Research Group from January 1921.⁴ Upon arriving in Japan in July 1927, he launched the journal *Seongseo Joseon* (*Scripture Joseon*, 1927-1942) with Ham Seok-Heon, Song Do-Young and three other members of the Joseon Scripture Research Group. Through this

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² Kim Gyo-Sin, "Introduction at the Launching of Seongseo Joseon," (July 1927)

³ Joseon is the name of Korea's last dynasty (1392-1910). It used to mean "Korea" or "Korean" until the latter part of the 20th century.

⁴ Uchimura Kanzo (1861-1930) was a Japanese author, Christian evangelist, and the founder of the Nonchurch Movement of Christianity in the Meiji and Taisho period Japan. He regarded Christianity as "Jesus Christ who lives and is always with us." He tried to understand Christianity not as a historical structure, but rather a spiritual mindset that demolishes that historical approach from the inside and continuously renews itself.



journal, Kim, Gyo-Sin spread Christianity based on a Non-Church position, while at the same time deepening his own thoughts to argue for a uniquely Joseon Christianity.

As a result of the “Seongseo Joseon Incident⁵,” he was interrogated by the Japan government, and he was imprisoned for a year. After his release from prison in 1944, he could no longer teach or evangelize, so he entered the Japan Nitrogenous Fertilizer Factory in Heungnam and worked as the chief of the housing office for Joseon employees. Even there, He focused his efforts on the improvement of their lives and the development of their character. Even under surveillance, he taught the Korean alphabet to the workers. While nursing a worker infected by typhus fever, however, he was infected himself, and he eventually died.⁶ By understanding suffering not as meaningless toil imposed on the powerless but as “creative labor” through which the injustice of the world is purified, and by willingly bearing this burden Kim Gyo-Sin was a dramatic witness to Jesus Christ.

Christian Thought of Kim Gyo-Sin

Distinguishing the essence from the ceremonial tradition of Christianity

A distinct feature of Kim Gyo-Sin’s Christian thought is, most of all, the fact that he strived to distinguish the essence from the ceremonial tradition of Christianity to minimize the practice and give maximal emphasis on the spirit. He thought that the core of Christianity lay in the liberation from self and the world to become a truly free being by connecting directly to God. Thus, he believed that the essence of Christianity was not the form, but the spirit, which lay in dynamic relationship between God and each believer. If the systems, rituals, and clergymen of the church existed without this spirit, it was nothing more than a shallow religious hobby. So he understood that it was none other than Luther’s Reformation which focused on this essence of Christianity and maximized the directness between God and the individual believer.⁷

I regret to say that the faith of today’s church is dead. Its orthodoxy is but a lifeless form and its progressiveness is only secularism. The church is no longer the body of Christ, the salt of the world, or the refuge for the lonely soul. It is no better than a cultivation center or a cultural institution.... But at least Christianity must not fall into formalism or worldliness. Was Christ not crucified in order to eliminate that very formality and worldliness?⁸

Joseon Christianity

He thought it was shameful, and was not afraid to criticize Korean Churches as they were

⁵ On the pretext of “Jowa (A Condolence for Frogs),” an article in the March 1942 *Seonso Joseon*, the colonial government arrested Kim Gyo-Sin and his colleagues for participating in the independence movement. Because this article, “Jowa,” means that the Joseon people are frogs and the Japanese government policy severe winter.

⁶ KIATS ed., *Kim Gyo-Sin: Essential Writings* (Seoul: KIATS, 2008), 12-19

⁷ *Ibid.*, 19-20.

⁸ Kim Gyo-Sin, “Return to a God-Centered Faith,” (December 1935)



strongly influenced and began to imitate the structures of foreign mission organizations. Kim Gyo-Sin strongly opposed the Korea church turning into some branch office of a foreign mission organization. His thought of Joseon Christianity is well mentioned in “the introduction at the launching of *Seongseo Joseon*.”

*At that time, I felt as if I heard a voice: “No matter what you do, you are a Korean! Ah! How can there be any other phrases which have more endless meanings than those? Understanding those, everything was hopeless, and everything was finished. At that moment, my vision focused clearly on one target, and the target was clearly God. I cannot dare to boast that I love Korea, but I believe I understand what relationship there is between Korea and I; how can I confront people who will laugh at slowness and tardiness of me.”*⁹

So Kim Gyo-shin thought that as the Lutheran Church and the Methodist Church had emerged from Germany and England respectively, the Korean church also needed to develop its own form of existence independent of foreign missionaries. He believed that because Koreans, just like westerners, were noble beings created in the image of God, God wanted Koreans not to be ashamed of their own history and tradition but to directly connect themselves to God and creatively improve their inherited tradition.¹⁰ In this sense, when the Japanese regarded the Korean Peninsula as an inferior location, rather he noted that the location of Joseon is not unfavorable but it has a lot of merits at “Joseon Jiri Sogo”:

*As discussed in detail, we should be content and thankful for having wonderful country, considering geographical factors such as geographical Units, area and population, mountains and coastlines, God’s gift of ideal climate, and the central location of a historical stage or a scene. Korea is definitely adequate to provide high standard of living and she can be a center stage that can contribute much to world history.... The fact that there were not much peaceful times proves, without any doubt, that Korea is centrally located in Asian political arena. Korea is an insecure place to seclude oneself from the world, but an ideal place for one to play an active part in world affairs....Only the primary cause of the problem depends on people who live there; their quality and courage are important factors.”*¹¹

Also he did not hesitate to severely criticize and challenge Joseon Christianity which was

⁹ Kim Gyo-Sin, “Introduction at the Launching of *Seongseo Joseon*,” (July 1927).

¹⁰ KIATS, 16.

¹¹ Kim Gyo-Sin *Joseon Jiri Sogo* (A Brief Study on Joseon Geography: March 1934).

dozing off in the midst of Western thought and institutions. The reason he published 158 issues of *Seongseo Joseon* in a course of 16 years, wrote “Joseon Jiri Sogo” to discuss the place of Joseon and his hope in the history of salvation, and published Ham SeokHeon’s “History of Joseon from a Biblical Perspective” was part of his effort to search for a form of existence for Joseon Christianity that could, by maintaining a national identity, firmly enroot itself in the traditional history of Korea.¹²

The Spirit Christ actualized in lives

Kim Gyo-Sin thought that one of the key elements of faith was for individual believers to manifest the spirit of Christianity in their lives. For him, it was crucial that we transform our own lives by making our every single move rely on Christ, who continuously tries to engage in conversation with us through Scripture. To thereby benefit our neighbors with overflowing honesty and purity, and to make peace with others through calmness, joy and an unyielding will of hope, we ought to be witnesses of the power of Christianity by actualizing this spirit of Christ in our lives.¹³ He severely criticized the believer who did not practice the instruction of the Bible:

If we ask a believer today for what purpose he believes in Jesus, one might answer probably that one does so in order to be washed of his sins and enter into eternal life. But the truth is, rather, aren't there more of those who say that they believe in Jesus for the improvement of their lives, to gain reputation from others, for self-cultivation or for social businesses?...Though people may say they want eternal life, it is nothing more than the greed of an old man on his deathbed and meaningless words to young adults. What is it other than perverted greed, wanting to enjoy all the glories of this world like the non-believers enjoy but wishing for additional blessings in heaven, of which the non-believer takes no part? What is it other than empty words to say that though the body dies, our soul will remain and be fulfilled afterwards?¹⁴

Moreover, he emphasized that it is extremely dangerous to evangelize only with words. Only the “evangelization of existence,” which was expressed through the believer’s life, was true evangelism. His thought is revealed well in an essay on “Evangelism through Being.”

The spreading of Christianity is not done by beautiful rhetoric or phrases but by the cross and the power of our Lord Christ, who has risen from the dead. This Biblical principle especially applies to the generation that wanders about

¹² KIATS, 21-22.

¹³ Ibid., 22.

¹⁴ Kim Gyo-Sin, “Return to a God-Centered Faith”, (December 1935).



*in the streets witnessing for Christ, which is only the form of Christianity. This is not age in which we should witness the gospel through sermons or the so-called gospel tracts, but we have confronted a time when we must testify through the entire being of the believer.*¹⁵

Prophetic Christianity

He realized that in true Christianity, the gospel, and prophecies were not mutually exclusive, but must coexist with equal value. This is so because those Christians who have been transformed into truly free persons who can love others in the gospel cannot help but criticize and resist any unjust reality that interferes with this principle of freedom and love.¹⁶ We can find out his prophetic and resistance spirit through the opening column of “Jowa” in *Seongseo Joseon* (March 1942):

*Early one rainy spring morning, the ice chunks between the rocks finally began to melt. I lowered myself to look into the pond and see how the frogs were doing, and alas, I could see two or three dead frogs floating around. I presume that the catastrophe happened due to the severe cold of last winter which froze the pond down to its very bottom. It is because parts of the pond froze which usually do not. After gathering the dead ones and burying them, I saw two frogs crawling around near the pond. Ah, it seems they, at least, have avoided extermination!*¹⁷

We can see in this essay that he regarded true Christianity as a spirit that claims war against all enemies of the truth in response to the movement of the age and setting. That is, he objected to the idea of religion merely being a means to securing inner freedom. Moreover, true Christianity must take the role of a prophet who fulfills his calling as a good steward and realizes his responsibility in relation to his neighbors.

The Non-Church Movement of Kim, Gyo-shin

The non-church movement is an indigenous Japanese Christian movement which was founded by Uchimura Kanzo in 1901. The non-church Christians agree with Uchimura that there is a basic distinction between “ecclesia” and “church.” Etymologically, “ecclesia” refers to an

¹⁵ Kim Gyo-Sin, “Evangelism through Being,” (October 1937).

¹⁶ KIATS, 22.

¹⁷ Kim Gyo-Sin, “Jowa- A Condolence for Frogs”, (March 1942) In reference, the Japanese Governor-General’s office claimed that the essay was an allegory of Korea and Japan, with the frogs representing the Korean people, and the bitter winter symbolizing Japan’s imperial policy, and that the essay presented a veiled declaration of Korea’s future resurrection. On the basis of this accusation, Kim Gyo-Sin, Ham Seok-Heon, Song Du-Yong, and 13 others were imprisoned, and some 400 readers were questioned. This became known as the “Seongseo Joseon Incident.” Because of this incident, *Seongseo Joseon* could not be issued.

assembly or congregation of believers, whereas “church” or “Kirche” refers to a temple or chapel. So the non-church Christians believe that Christ intended to create the former, an informal spiritual community rather than a major institutional system.¹⁸ Also, Uchimura viewed Christianity as “Jesus Christ who lives and is always with us.” He tried to understand Christianity not as a historical structure, but rather a spiritual mindset that demolishes that historical approach from the inside and continuously renews itself. Kim Gyo-Sin called Uchimura “the one and only great teacher,” and considered Uchimura’s understanding of Christianity “the true gospel.”¹⁹

Such are the reasons why Kim Gyo-Sin had chosen a Non-Church theory. This theory advocates a minimalistic form of lay Bible study groups based on a simplified faith and Scripture, leaving everything else in a state of simplicity and nature. He argues his thought of Non-Churchism against the opposite of it.

But what we learned from Uchimura over a period of ten years was the Bible, not Non-Churchism. We have learned the gospel. Even if in his mind there was the intention to establish and accomplish the Non-Church Movement, what I learned was not Non-Church theory or belief but the truth of the Scripture.... Some say the inherent mission of the Non-Church Movement is to attack the established church, but my Non Churchism is by no means so... We refrain from such grand thoughts of church reformation but only try to follow in the footsteps of Christ by learning the truths of Scripture and disciplining ourselves with whips. If you nevertheless want to call it Non-Churchism, go ahead.²⁰

For him, Non-Churchism was the way to maximize the spirit and simplify procedures so as to not overlook the main essence. Kim Gyo-Sin said that his Non-Church theory “entrusted the entire life of the Christian to Christ,” and was a “complete Christianity” which tried to live by the standard of Christ with God as the center. At the same time, his Non-Church theory was the spirit of criticism and protest against everything that obstructed its motivation and practice.²¹ He explains an essential meaning of his Non-Churchism to the proponents of the Churchism:

It was Luther’s Protestantism and Mr. Uchimura Kanzo’s Non-Churchism that protested against the so called “the proponents of the Churchism” who advocated the omnipotence of the church and declared that there is no deliverance outside the church. They argued, instead, that there is indeed deliverance outside the church and claimed that it was not a matter of

¹⁸ Carlo Caldarola, *Christianity: The Japanese Way* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1979), 50.

¹⁹ KIATS, 13.

²⁰ Kim Gyo-Sin, “My Non-Churchism,” (September 1936), quoted from KIATS, 117-118.

²¹ KIATS, 20-21.



church affiliation but a matter of faith. Therefore if Roman Catholicism had not become corrupt through Churchism, Luther's Protestantism would have been unnecessary, and if the new church had not fallen into a state of abnormality due to church supremacy, there would have been no need for Non-Churchism. Non-Churchism is also called "the full Christianity."²²

In this sense, we can assess his Non-Churchism pursued to find out an initial spirit of Church not enclosed by institutional formality. Needless to say, even Kim Gyo-Sin acknowledged the necessity of a minimal formality in the church, in the gathering of people with limited knowledge.

Assessment of Kim Gyo-Sin

Kim Gyo-Sin was a solitary heretic in the Korean church while he was alive. *Seongseo Joseon*, which was written in prayer and blood in his spare time in teaching, had no more than 400 subscribers. Even today there are denominations that disapprove of the Non-Church theory, calling it a heresy which denies the church.²³ Then today why do scholars research his thought and life?²⁴ Why do we still commemorate him?

First, his Christian thought and life always bear the responsibility of history, maintaining an apocalyptic hope. Kim warns that it is a serious misunderstanding to think that Christianity includes mysterious trickeries to indulge God's favor through predicting one's fortunes. He insisted that Christians should be commonsensical persons who would suffer insecurity rather than be relieved in false peace, and awakened persons who agonize in awareness rather than live in vain paralysis. And if a Christian happens to fail trying to fearlessly live a life of universal justice, they can fail in security because Christianity is a religion that has overcome death.²⁵

Second, he tried to pursue an essential feature of Church. For him, Non-Churchism was the way to maximize the spirit and simplify procedure so as to not overlook the main essence. Through his Joseon Non-church Movement, we will be able to discover the keen subjectivity of the faith and thought of Kim Gyo-Sin, who tried to distinguish the essential and universal spirit from Japanese formality even in Non-Church theory, and to subjectively uphold it as a Joseon Christian.²⁶

Third, he tried to connect the two themes of faith and the nation. For him, Christianity was a formative power of creative history which transformed the history of Joseon so that it could anticipate the justice and mercy of the God who "preserves the self-existence of the weak," and manifest and testify to it in history.

²² Kim Gyo-Sin, "A Discussion of the Withdrawal of the Title Non-Churchism," (May 1937), KIATS, 119-121.

²³ KIATS, 23.

²⁴ According to <http://dl.nanet.go.kr/SearchList.do>, master and doctoral thesis about Kim Gyo-Sin is over 70 pieces in Korea.

²⁵ KIATS, 25.

²⁶ Ibid., 26.

Conclusion

The Korean Church boast about 10 million Christian members and has sent out the second highest number of missionaries, next to the United States. Compared to the 400 thousand Protestants in Kim Gyo-Sin's lifetime, it has grown considerably. But unfortunately, we can hardly find witnesses of the spirit and power of Christianity in such a large church. Though he died, his many essays and words are saying to today's Christians: Do you keep purity and honesty in your heart and in your lives? Are you properly serving this beautiful creation of God through a service of love? Is your spirit of Christianity alive and active? We had to be encouraged and learn from predecessors of faith, such as Kim, Gyo-Sin.

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