

PART I

# **Christian America and Confucian Korea**



# 1

## Jones 1867–1887: Experiencing the American Christ

*In this chapter, we ask the question “Who was Jesus Christ for George Heber Jones as he began his missionary career in Korea?” We learn how he came to this understanding in his conversion. We look at the many factors that influenced his growing faith and knowledge in Christ and how he went about learning and practicing his faith before he was sent to the mission field.*

### 1.1 The Conversion of George Heber Jones

Throughout his life, Jones looked back upon his conversion experience, at age fourteen, as the foundational event of his life, “the greatest single event of my life.”<sup>1</sup> He writes in his autobiographical sketch, “Real Stories from Real Life”:

I attended the services and listened attentively with growing convictions concerning certain things. First, that no man could be saved except

1. In his unfinished autobiographical sketch entitled *Real Stories from Real Life*, Jones dedicates the third story to his conversion. George Heber Jones, *Real Stories from Real Life*, ed. William A. Main (Tiburon, CA, 1990), 14. The following sections on his conversion are from this book.

by the Lord Jesus, and second, that I needed to definitely take the step of accepting Him as my Savior...One night, toward the close of the revival, the message took hold of me. I felt I could hold out no longer...Sam Lewis, my chum, was sitting alongside and when the invitation came for those who desired to take Christ as their Savior to come down to the altar – it was before the day of “hold up hands” or singing [[[ signing? ]]] cards – I said to my friend, “Sam, if you will go with me, I’ll go to the altar!” And together we started down the aisle, and then at the altar rail in dear old Fourth St. Church, I knelt, a seeker of life through the Savior. The people crowded around, they prayed, they prayed for me, and by and by there came into my heart a sweet peace; a knowledge and assurance that God for Christ’s sake had forgiven me my sins and I began to pray amid my tears, both of grief and joy. I know I was saved that night. I know I entered definitely into a new relationship with God. As we rose from our knees the good people sang, “Take the name of Jesus with you,” a sweet blessed counsel, and I have done so through all the years.<sup>2</sup>

Jones described his conversion to Christ in three ways. First, Jesus Christ is the living Savior who opened heaven’s door in order to unite him with God for “an inner life” with God. To believe in Jesus was not mainly a matter of knowledge, nor a logical problem about how Jesus was both human and divine, as the traditional doctrines stated. Rather, to be a believer in Jesus was to experience God personally, for himself. It was to have an “experimental,” living faith.

...at that time I was not devoid of knowledge of the teachings of Christianity and the forms of church life. But it was the beginning of my inner life with God, the experience of a new birth of that supreme experience which the Savior declared when he said, “You must be born again”...God has a thousand different ways in which he brings the souls of men [sic] to himself, but though there be a thousand ways, there is but one result: the new birth, being born of the Spirit, born of God.<sup>3</sup>

Jones saw Jesus of his conversion as the expression of God’s life

2. Jones, *Real Stories*, 14.

3. *Ibid.*, 46.

among humanity. Jesus was a “Savior with whom people must enter into a relationship” since he opened to all peoples a relationship of “sonship” or “filial relationship” with God. It gave them eternal life and a more abundant life here on earth. Jesus’ earthly life signaled that God wanted to restore the original unity with the human race. God had created humanity to be his sons and daughters, but that original unity had been broken on the human side by their sin. Thus, salvation in Christ is a reunion with God, with Christ as God’s mediator. Sin needs to be overcome because it causes separation, a life of death and destruction, a corrupt and immoral human life, eternal punishment, and a life in search of meaning and truth. When he arrived in Korea, Jones saw the Korean people as needing this same union with God and needing a Savior from their sin, death, and the world. To Jones, Jesus is the Savior of an experiential religion of the heart that meets the spiritual hunger and need of all human beings.

Second, Jones said that the Christ of his conversion was always found in the fellowship and community of the Christian church. Knowing Christ was not a private spiritual experience to be kept to oneself. It was a communal event that placed the new believer in a living community of faith, where Christ dwelt. He writes:

Thus I came into the membership of the Christian church and began what afterward, in the providence of God, became my life work. I can never adequately express my debt of gratitude to the church for all she has meant to me. I was an unknown and very ordinary lad, seriously handicapped at the start of life by poverty and frail health. It was at the altar of the church that I found God and entered into a conscious relationship of sonship and acceptance with Him. It was the ministry of the Church that brought God and Christ into my life. This is the biggest thing that ever happened to me or that can happen to any boy...The Church opened up to my vision the great and eternal world, the world where God reigns and in which men meet Him.<sup>4</sup>

4. *Ibid.*, 61.

Jesus, the mediator between God and humanity, continued his work in the Christian church. The church was the place where Jesus continued his ministry of reconciliation with the people of God. So he says:

I was assigned to a class, a regular Methodist class. It was made up of about 20 young people and met every Tuesday evening...there was no escape from testifying, and I then learned to examine my own heart life and to express my personal understanding of my own condition and aspiration. Those were blessed days, and that old classroom meant more to me than any School of Theology I ever saw. Listening to older Christians, I learned the true meaning of vital heart life with God. I learned to hate sin as my chief foe, to love God and to trust Him, to value the blood of the Lord Jesus Christ, and to depend on the Holy Spirit. It was personal religion, intelligent heart-searching, expressed in a witnessing life, fired with a sense of human need of Christ, a clear understanding of the perils of worldly life and a desire to bring others into precious faith.<sup>5</sup>

Although his conversion took place in a Methodist Church and he served as a Methodist missionary, Jones never adopted a “sectarian” denominational outlook, even in terms of his theology. Rather, the checkered religious background of his family and his later appreciation of Christian history made him recognize that there is only one great Fundamental, “that the church has no other foundation than that is laid, namely Jesus Christ.”<sup>6</sup>

Jones’s great grandfather, Edwards of Denhigh, was active in the Welsh Wesleyan Church and personally knew Reginald Heber, the Bishop of Calcutta, from whom the name “Heber” came into the Jones family. Jones grew up in a Welsh-speaking church. His mother was raised as a Roman Catholic, but later, joined the Episcopalian Church, in which Jones was confirmed and attended Sunday school.

5. *Ibid.*, 53.

6. *Ibid.*, 59.

In his early teens, he went to a Presbyterian church with his friends. His mother, at first, scolded him for joining the Methodist Church after his conversion in 1881 because it was seen as a “peculiar sect, extravagant in religious things, given to shouting and noise and regarded with feelings of amusement or contempt.” But she later joined it herself.

For Jones, the church was an historical body which held within it a great diversity of beliefs, customs, and doctrines. This understanding stopped him from making any culture-based “peculiarity” the identifying mark of the church, such as “matters of dress, specialities [sic] in conduct, forms of creedal doctrine, emphasis upon a single idea, and as Seventh Day Adventist, a rite or a form of government.”<sup>7</sup> What mattered for the church is Jesus Christ, whose earthly life is continued through the communal life of the church and believers. He writes:

The Church made me the heir of a great and glorious history. I have already indicated that the force of heredity made it a natural thing for me to become a Methodist and my heart was thrilled and rejoiced as I have read of the men and achievements of the Wesleyan Revival in Europe and America. But from my earliest Church days I cannot say that I was a good sectarian. And later I came to realize that Methodist was but a convenient form, an auxiliary of the Kingdom of God. The eager quest of my mind has in the years that have followed carried my love out to all organized forms of Christianity and back through the corridors of time until I just gathered into my heart all the splendid history of faith in all the ages.<sup>8</sup>

Third, Christ’s key work was to renew and reform the human character. For Jones, the union with God had the purpose of refitting

7. Jones tells how he got “interested in a rather emotional expression of Christianity and learned how to shout...but I was repelled by their extravagances. I could not see any connection between their filial relationship with God and cutting up strange antics in meeting; and to claim that to wear a collar and necktie was a sin.” *Ibid.*, 18–19.

8. *Ibid.*, 63.

human beings in line with human “filial relationship” with God. Having been born again in God, he was to grow in the “ideals of spiritual Christianity,” remain faithful in “personal practical living,” stay away from “ways that lead to evil,” and be trained “in the virtues of Christian personality.”<sup>9</sup> To be a disciple of Jesus meant becoming a better human being from the inside to live a moral and purposeful life in the society.

Jones grew in his faith through an active life in the local Methodist Episcopal church: always being present at all sessions on Sunday, with class meetings on Tuesday evenings, prayer meetings on Thursday evenings, and choir practice on Friday evenings. He began to work for the emerging telephone business and with the Utica YMCA, which was just beginning to be organized—first, as its janitor, and then, as the assistant to the secretary.

Through these, he was able to put his newfound faith into action and came into touch with Christian businessmen who “represent[ed] the highest and best of our American Christian life.”<sup>10</sup> Jones saw Christ’s work in the human soul being brought to life in the headquarters of a growing business, for these Christian businessmen “helped a struggling badly handicapped lad along life’s pathway towards life’s best goals.”<sup>11</sup> For example, the treasurer of the telephone company, Mr. Woods, helped him learn Latin to prepare him for college. This friendship helped him to appreciate how “true Christian views and sympathies” affected social life.<sup>12</sup> More than the three Rs of the schoolroom, he appreciated how this work trained him for the three Hs: “head, hand and heart.”<sup>13</sup> Being a follower of Christ meant living an ethical life in society. Jones did not believe that Christians

9. All quotes in this paragraph from Jones, *Real Stories*, 61.

10. *Ibid.*, 27.

11. *Ibid.*

12. *Ibid.*, 33.

13. *Ibid.*, 34.

should go against the world, nor that the salvation of the soul meant neglecting their life here on earth. He believed that a change in human character would necessarily lead to a change in the larger society.

This was the Jesus Christ of Jones' conversion. To be saved by Christ meant that now, he had become reunited with God as a child of God. As a renewed person, he became a disciple of Christ in the spiritual life of the church community. And Christ continued to work in Jones's life to renew his humanity and personality to make him a citizen in society with a moral core.

## **1.2 Jones's Early Life**

In addition to his unforgettable conversion experience, to which Jones often looked back to regain his life's focus, Jones also regarded his early growing years as a formative time that gave him an openness toward religious commitment, a deep thirst for learning, and a confident perspective toward life. "Local anchorage, which means so much to other men [sin]" was denied to Jones, and his early life was "one of constant change of march and exile."<sup>14</sup> He was born in a hotel in Mohawk, NY, where his parents were staying on August 14, 1867 and lived there the first three years. Then, the next four years were spent in New York City, after which the family moved back to upstate New York to Utica, where he spent his teen years until age 18. The next two years in Rochester were the time of his professional growth and development, along with new religious experiences. It was here that he received the call to be an apostle to Korea, where he would spend a total of twenty-one years. After his return in 1909, he

14. *Ibid.*, 1.