

Foreword

Paul Hyoshin Kim was a respected and beloved Korean American pastor and theologian whose untimely death in 2014 occurred before he was able to see this book through to publication. Born in South Korea in 1958, Paul immigrated to the United States with his family when he was ten years old. A PhD graduate from Princeton Theological Seminary, he served as pastor of churches both in New Jersey and California. In addition to his pastoral responsibilities, his life was devoted to peace and social justice work. He served as the first director of the National Campaign for Peace and Reunification of Korea, sponsored by the National Council of Churches. He was also involved in interfaith dialogues and advocacy for responsible care of the environment. It is largely due to the dedication of his wife, Christie Huh, that Paul's research is now available to a wider public.

In his provocative study, Paul Kim tells the story of two early Methodist missionaries in Korea, George Heber Jones (1867–1919) and Choe Pyonghon (1858–1927). The story is significant for more than historical reasons. Kim shows that Jones and Choe wrestled with issues that continue to face the church today—especially the question of how best to understand the interplay between the Christian gospel and the various cultures in which it is proclaimed and lived out and

the question of the extent to which the universalism of the Christian gospel is compatible with the national aspirations of a people.

Jones was born in Mohawk, New York, of English-Scottish-Welsh ancestry. His faith journey began with a heartfelt conversion experience as a youth in a Methodist church. An exceptionally disciplined and self-educated person, he rose to a leadership role in the YMCA movement and learned much from his involvement in that movement. Although he lacked formal college and seminary education, he felt called to become a missionary and was eventually able to convince the missionary council of the Methodist Episcopal Church of his qualifications. He arrived in Korea in 1888, only twenty-one years old and one of the first missionaries from America to what was often called the “Hermit Kingdom,” a land whose people and culture were entirely unknown in the West.

From the beginning of his time in Korea, Jones received stellar assistance from Choe Pyonghon, a young Korean who taught him the Korean language and introduced him to the history, religion, and culture of the Korean people. The strong and mutually formative friendship of Jones and Choe is one of the fascinating aspects of the story that Kim tells. In no small part, due to the help of Choe, Jones entered deeply into the life of his adopted land. With his genuine respect for and love of the Korean people, he became an effective preacher of the Christian gospel in their own language. Jones’ desire to assist in the indigenization of the Christian message did not mean his withholding judgment on certain features of traditional Korean religion and culture. In particular, he sharply criticized the practice of ancestor worship as the de facto state religion undergirding the repressive government of that time and its moribund social order.

While Kim describes both the difficulties that Jones faced and the many accomplishments of his missionary endeavors, the intent of the book is in no way to provide the reader with a hagiography. On

the contrary, the author clearly acknowledges that Jones brought an “American Christ” to Korea, a Savior who bore the marks of late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century American confidence in the supremacy of its culture and the inherent rightness of its expansionist destiny. “Jones was not able to disengage himself completely from his cultural worldview,” Kim writes.

Perhaps the most striking evidence of this fact is the attitude of Jones to Japan’s long domination, and then, complete control of Korea after the end of the Russo–Japanese war in 1905. Jones discouraged Korean Christians from actively resisting Japan’s encroachment on the sovereignty and independence of the Korean people. He did so, Kim explains, for both ideological and pragmatic reasons. Ideologically, Jones believed that the Japanese domination would be a benefit to Koreans since the Japanese were fast becoming a powerful nation, far closer to the industrially advanced nations of Europe and the United States, and thus, able to contribute to the “civilizing” process that was part of the motto of Jones’ missionary work: “Christianize and civilize.” Pragmatically, Jones, no doubt, judged that public acts of resistance against the superior power of Japan would only result in disaster for the young Christian movement in Korea. Kim agrees that under the circumstances, armed resistance would have been neither politically realistic nor spiritually justifiable. Nevertheless, he contends that Jones missed the opportunity to support the growth of social and political responsibility as part of the living out of the Christian gospel that had begun to form in the hearts and minds of many Koreans in these crisis years of the early twentieth century. What Jones failed to see, in Kim’s judgment, was that “Jesus was changing a despairing people into a people of the way of the cross, willing to sacrifice themselves in non-violent resistance against evil.”

Choe, Jones’ older assistant for several years, was a gentleman

scholar of the ancient Confucian texts. His decision to confess to Christ as savior and become a member of the church came only after a deep personal struggle. At the heart of this struggle was the question of whether a Western Savior could save people of the East, including Koreans. Choe's eventual answer to this question would be that Jesus was not a foreigner, but the universal Savior and that his message and life of self-sacrificial love, far from requiring a betrayal of the Korean people and their cultural heritage, was the power of God for their salvation, both as individuals and as a nation.

Neither for Jones nor for Choe was the gospel restricted to the salvation of souls. They both believed that faith and practice are inseparable, that salvation has both a spiritual and a social dimension, that it encompasses both soul and body, both individual and society. But Choe was, in Kim's reading, more consistent in this emphasis. While Jones and Choe agreed that the decadence of Korean neo-Confucianism was incompatible with the spirit of Christianity, Choe sought to retrieve the ancient teachings of Confucianism, which he would come to understand as a kind of *praeparatio evangelica*. Christianity, in his view, was not the antithesis of Confucianism, but its fulfillment. He held that there was important continuity as well as real discontinuity between the texts of his fathers and the new texts of the Bible.

Choe became not only an impressive preacher of the gospel, but a well-respected author. His critics have inclined to label him as a cultural theologian, a comparative religious scholar, a poetical preacher, or a mere consciousness-raiser. According to Kim, however, seeing the nation and heritage of Korea "collapsing right before his eyes," Choe was a robust proclaimer of the new "way" of following Jesus the crucified Savior, who was able to empower both the personal transformation of Koreans and the building of a new Korean society. Making creative use of Confucian terms and

concepts to shed light on traditional Christian doctrines, he refused to withdraw “to the inner walls of the church or the inner world of the soul.” He nurtured a sense of social responsibility in the life of Korean Christians and in the young Korean church at a time of profound national crisis and never relinquished his hope that the gospel of Jesus would bring about a new Korean identity and a new Korean nation.

For Kim, there are lessons to be learned from the early Christian missionary work of Jones and Choe in Korea. He believes that despite Jones’ failure to disengage fully from the worldview that he inherited and carried with him to Korea, he would warn preachers and missionaries today to recognize “the narrowness and particularity of our ethnic and national identities.” Choe, for his part, would remind us that the universalism of the Christian gospel does not mean the abolition of a people’s cultural heritage and the distinctive gifts of their national life. He would challenge Christians today to account for God’s presence in the various cultures, histories, and experiences of people as well as bearing witness to the unique reconciling work of Jesus Christ as God with and for us. In the words of Paul Lehmann, the spirit of Christ is the transforming power in our relationship with God and others that “makes and keeps human life human in the world.” For Kim, in important but different ways, the missionary labors of both Jones and Choe opened the way for the “American Christ” to become the “Jesus of Korea.”

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