

Protestant Church Swells in South Korea

Determined and hard-working South Koreans have created an economic miracle in Asia. Economic progress has been impressive. But even more imposing is the unusual spread of Christianity in this ancient oriental country.

The Protestant Church, mainly Presbyterian, yet to celebrate its centennial in 1984, has grown to 11 percent of the nation's population. At least one-fourth of the military personnel are Christians. The 2,000 church buildings in Seoul, most of which are filled to capacity on Sunday, and the daily 5 a.m. prayer meetings are but two signs of the spiritual vitality of Korean Christianity. Representing 14 percent of the nation's population, the influence of Christians extends far beyond their numbers. Many of the Protestants are well educated and carry political weight.

When a Russian-backed Communist regime was established in North Korea at the end of the Second World War, most Christians fled to the South, rebuilt their churches and became a strong anti-communist force. Many refugees became successful businessmen, government officials, and army officers.

Not all stayed true to their orthodox Presbyterianism. A significant few embraced a liberation theology in the 1960's. This theology led to the public defiance of President Park Chung Hee. Most Korean Christians didn't find liberation theology attractive. They are noted for their conservative outlook in faith and practice. But a unique combination of circumstances brought middle-of-the-road and even conservative Christians into opposition to President Park in the 1970's.

Unlike many of the Christian leaders who came from the North, Park was a southerner from Kyongsang Province. And he was a Buddhist. Furthermore, in his early days in the South Korean army, Park was alleged to have participated in a Communist-instigated mutiny against Syngman Rhee and his northerner-dominated government. The staunchly anti-Communist Christians never fully accepted his repudiation of communism.

Christians also began to seriously question Park's quest for absolute power, especially with the enactment in 1972 of the Yushin Constitution, which made him President for life. Martial law was declared, the old constitution suspended and the National Assembly dissolved.

In 1973 Christians drew up a declaration that expressed their determination to stand on the side of freedom and democracy. In the words of the Theological Declaration of Korean Christians, 1973:

The present dictatorship in Korea is destroying rule by law and persuasion; it now rules by force and threat alone. Community is being turned into jungle . . . The regime in Korea is destroying freedom of conscience and freedom of religious belief. There is freedom neither of expression nor of silence. There is

interference by the regime in Christian churches' worship, prayer, gatherings, content of sermons, and teaching of the Bible... ..

The dictatorship in Korea is using systematic deception, manipulation, and indoctrination to control people. The mass media has been turned into the regime's propaganda machine to tell the people half-truths and outright lies, and to control and manipulate information to deceive people....

The dictatorship in Korea uses sinister and inhuman and, at the same time, ruthlessly efficient means to destroy political opponents, intellectual critics, and innocent people. The use of the Korean Central Intelligence Agency (KCIA) for this purpose is somewhat similar to the evil ways of the Nazi Gestapo or the KGB of the Stalin era. People are physically and mentally tortured, intimidated and threatened, and sometimes even disappear completely. Such treatments are indeed diabolical acts against humanity.

After Park's assassination in October 1979, there was a period of political upheaval. On February 11, 1981, South Koreans went to the polls to choose a 5,278 member electoral college. They voted more than two-thirds of the seats to the Democratic Justice Party (DJP), of which President Chun Doo Hwan is leader. The turnout of over 78 percent of the electorate and the sweeping victory by the DJP suggest that most South Koreans prefer to go along with Chun rather than risk further upheavals under the weak, disorganized and more liberal opposition.

Chun is well-accepted by the rank and file of the Christian community. His anti-Communist credentials are excellent. He is cultivating the articulate and well-educated Christian elite. Dr. Yonggi Cho, pastor of probably the largest Christian church in the world today, with a membership of 140,000 and growing at a rate of 5,000 new converts each month, was asked about the recent political changes in South Korea. His reply: "In past years, whenever we had a political upheaval, things actually became better for the Church, and this time with Chun Doo Hwan becoming the President, it is like a boon for the Christian Church. He is a God fearing man. Whenever he gives a public address, he always ends the message with an admiration of the Lord. Even in his recent inaugural address, he ended it with a blessing to God. His wife, from time to time, attends our Sunday morning services incognito. They have a Christian service in their home once a week. President Chun is a Christ-honouring person. Directly and indirectly he will be a boost to our Christian efforts in Korea. The Korean Church as a whole is now targeting that by the end of this decade there will be 30 million converts. That's about 70 percent of our population becoming born-again Christians!"

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