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Korean Pentecost

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Item Type	Article
Authors	Hoon Lee, Young
Publisher	Asia Pacific Theological Seminary
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Download date	2026-06-23 12:55:41
Link to Item	http://hdl.handle.net/20.500.12424/237026

KOREAN PENTECOST:
THE GREAT REVIVAL OF 1907

Young-Hoon Lee

Introduction

The Great Revival of 1907 in Pyongyang is of great significance, for through this movement Korean Protestantism experienced the powerful gifts of the Holy Spirit for the first time. The Christians who had entered the church with various motives now came to know what true repentance was and what it meant in Christian life. They also came to feel the excitement of their faith. The Great Revival of 1907 not only made the Korean church exuberant but it also energized the already existent Christian traditions and brought about the exceptional growth of the Korean church.

This revival had the most important influence on the Korean church.¹ Many local revivals throughout Korea had characterized the life of the church from the beginning but the Great Revival swept over the country and affected the entire Christian movement.

I. The Origin of the Revival: Wonsan Prayer Meeting

The origin of the revival may be traced to a prayer meeting of Methodist missionaries at Wonsan in 1903.² The outbreak of this

¹ William Blair reported this event. He called this event "The Korean Pentecost." He was living in Pyongyang (now the capitol city of North Korea) as a missionary at that time. See William Blair and Bruce Hunt, *The Korean Pentecost and the Suffering Which Followed* (Carlisle: Banner of Truth, 1977), pp. 71-74. See also Donald D. Owens, *Revival Fires in Korea* (Kansas City, MO: Nazarene Publisher, 1977), pp. 23-79.

² This is a remarkable coincidence since a Methodist minister through a Bible study and prayer meeting in Topeka, Kansas, U.S.A, originated the contemporary

movement is attributed to R. A. Hardie. He was a medical doctor and Methodist missionary ministering in Kangwon province.³ Although he had worked very hard, he could achieve little in his missionary work. He felt greatly burdened and began to examine his spiritual state and the motives of his missionary work in retrospect.

During this reflective period, he and seven other missionaries gathered for a week-long conference of Bible study and prayer at Wonsan under the leadership of a visiting missionary from China, Miss M. C. White. Hardie was to report his research on prayer at this gathering. During his preparation he experienced, according to him, some unusual feelings as if stirred by the Spirit. When he read Luke 11:13, "If you then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!" he came to realize that his missionary work had failed because he had counted too much on his own effort in ministry. He testified that his heart was stirred by this passage and in this scripture he found simple faith in the gift of the Holy Spirit. The feeling he experienced was a deep conviction of sin and captivation by the holiness of God. He knew the power of the Spirit within himself and, consequently, could not but share it with others.

Hardie gave testimony to his fellow missionaries of his experience: the new infusion of power and peace by the Spirit. Many were touched by the testimony. Subsequently, he gave the same testimony to a Korean congregation, confessing that his own pride, hardness of heart, and lack of faith had brought shame and confusion upon his ministry.⁴ This moved the hearts of the audience and they also wanted to follow his example in confessing their sins and in being open to receive such a vital religious experience.⁵

Pentecostal movement. The Pentecostal movement that had started in the late 1900s moved its center to Houston in 1903 and then to Los Angeles in 1906. It is around this time that this movement spread from Los Angeles to all over the world, which is about the same period of time as the Great Revival of Korea. Cf. Vinson Synan, *The Holiness-Pentecostal Moment in the United States* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1971), pp. 99-102.

³ R. A. Hardie came to Korea as a medical missionary of the Canadian mission, but in 1888, joined the Southern Methodist mission. See Owens, *Revival Fires*, p. 26.

⁴ Owens, *Revival Fires*, pp. 26-27.

⁵ Owens, *Revival Fires*, p. 27.

Hardie's public confession of sin must have been painful and humiliating to him. His honest confession, however, made a strong impact on the hearts of the audience. The Korean congregation began to yearn for the same gift of the Spirit that had changed Hardie so dramatically. Such yearning for the gift of the Holy Spirit produced subsequent Bible study classes and prayer meetings. At such meetings, Korean Christians confessed their sins, gave testimonies, and experienced and tasted the grace of God in a new way for the first time. These revival meetings were successful from the beginning. The first Holy Spirit movement in Korea thus began to burst into flames at the conference in Wonsan.

The flame of the revival movement was restricted to the Wonsan area in 1903. In the following year, revival movements intensified in the area. Soon the news about the revival at Wonsan spread widely and reached Pyongyang. Thus Presbyterian missionaries in the city began to seek the spiritual gifts that had been given at Wonsan. They invited Hardie to speak at a united conference in Pyongyang.⁶ He spoke from the First Epistle of John and urged them to receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. As they prayed fervently, there was an enormous outpouring of blessings.

Similar conferences and revival meetings were held in Seoul in September 1906, with great manifestations of the gift of the Holy Spirit. At a missionary conference,⁷ Howard Agnew Johnston, a missionary from North America, reported to missionaries and Korean congregations about the Welsh revival and a revival in India.

It is one of the greatest mysteries of the movement of God's Spirit, and the revival that His presence brings, that the years 1900-1910 are often considered the period of the great awakening--in Asia, Americas, and Europe. The great Welsh revival is a well-known part of this worldwide movement. The Revs. Seth Joshua and Evan John Roberts were its leaders. Evan Roberts, especially, had no special technique but he preached with great anointing. As he often said, that there are four main points to revival: 1) the past must be made clear by confession of every known sin to God, and every wrong unto man must be put right; 2) every doubtful thing in the believer's life must be put away; 3) prompt and implicit obedience must be yielded to the Spirit of God; and 4) public confession of Christ must be made.

⁶ Kyung-Bae Min, *Hankuk Kidokkyohoesa* [*Church History of Korea*], rev. ed. (Seoul: Christian Literature Society, 1982), p. 251.

⁷ Sung-Bum Yun, *Kidokkyo-wa Hankuk Sasang* [*Christianity and Korean Thought*] (Seoul: Christian Literature Society, 1964), pp. 185-86.

During the brief period of the Welsh revival, 100,000 people were converted. In 1910, 60,000 of those who were converted during the six months of revival were still members of the Welsh churches. News of the Welsh revival quickened the Christians in both New Zealand and Australia. The great evangelists J. Wilbur Chapman, Reuben A. Torrey, and the American, Dwight L. Moody, were used mightily in bringing revival both to America and to these lands "down under."

During this same period revivals occurred in India. The pattern of revival there was the same as the sweeping revival that had occurred in Wales. Throughout India prayer meetings, evangelistic campaigns, revivals in boys' and girls' schools, indicated that the Spirit of God was at work in the land. In the main, the awakening of 1905 in India was of an indigenous nature; that is, many of the evangelists were Indian preachers.⁸

II. Korean Pentecost: The Pyongyang Revival

The air of revivalism, which had started from the spiritual experience at the Wonsan conference, reached its climax at the great revival meeting in Pyongyang in January 1907. The meeting was to last for ten days, focusing on Bible study and research as they had done in previous conferences. They preached evangelism intensively, however, in the evening meetings. According to the reports of missionaries, it was during the evening meetings that people witnessed strong manifestations of the Holy Spirit.

On Monday, January 14, 1907, about 1,500 gathered in the evening meeting. As it drew to a conclusion, according to William Blair, a Presbyterian missionary who served forty years in the northern part of Korea, they received the power of the Holy Spirit. Graham Lee was leading the meeting that evening. After a short sermon, Lee took over and called for prayer, encouraging them to pray together and even pray aloud if they wished. The whole audience began to pray out loud and in unison. Suddenly there was a burst into a roar of prayer as people were feeling a strong urge to prayer.⁹

The prayer that sounded like the falling of many waters captivated the whole congregation. They then began to repent of their sins publicly

⁸ See Owens, *Revival Fires*, pp. 23-25.

⁹ Blair & Hunt, *The Korean Pentecost*, pp. 73-74.

one by one. Blair described the scene during the annual Presbyterian and Methodist Bible conference in January 1907,

The evening meeting connected with the Bible conference began January 6th, in the Central Church [in Pyongyang], with more than 1,500 men present. Women were excluded for lack of room. Different missionaries and Korean leaders had charge of the evening meetings, all seeking to show the need of the Spirit's control in our lives and the necessity for love and righteousness.... After a short sermon...man after man would rise, confess his sin, break down and weep, and then throw himself on the floor and beat the floor with his fists in a perfect agony of conviction.... Sometimes, after a confession, the whole audience would break out into audible prayer, and the effect of that audience of hundreds of men praying together in audible prayer was something indescribable. Again, after another confession, they would break out into uncontrollable weeping and we would all weep together. We couldn't help it. And so the meeting went on until 2 a.m., with confession and weeping and praying.... We had prayed to God for an outpouring of His Holy Spirit upon the People and it had come.¹⁰

It was reported that the experience of the Spirit at this meeting instantly solved the problem of individual sins and helped people release their grief over the fate of the nation, as the country had been subject to the harsh Japanese rule. It was said that this was their first experience of feeling and tasting the dynamic power of the Holy Spirit. The same outpouring of the Holy Spirit continued to take place even more intensely the next evening. Blair provided the following insight of the meeting,

Then began a meeting the like of which I had never seen before, nor wish to see again unless in God's sight it is absolutely necessary. Every sin a human being can commit was publicly confessed that night. Pale and trembling with emotion, in agony of mind and body, guilty souls, standing in the white light of their judgment, saw themselves as God saw them. Their sins rose up in all their vileness, till shame and grief and self-loathing took complete possession; pride was driven out, the face of man forgotten. Looking up to heaven, to Jesus whom they had betrayed, they smote themselves and cried out with bitter wailing: "Lord, Lord, cast us not away forever!" Everything else was forgotten, nothing else mattered. The scorn of men, the penalty of the law, even death itself seemed of small consequences if only God forgave. We may have other theories of desirability or undesirability of public

¹⁰ Allen D. Clark, *A History of the Church in Korea* (Seoul: Christian Literature Society of Korea, 1971), pp. 160-62.

confession of sin. I have had mine; but I know now that when the Spirit of God falls upon guilty souls, there will be confession, and no power on earth can stop it.¹¹

Three years later, Blair wrote a book about this meeting¹² and in his book he described the Great Revival of 1907 as follows, "Just as on the day of Pentecost, they were altogether in one place, on one accord praying, and suddenly there came from heaven the sound as of rushing of a mighty wind, and it filled all the house where they were sitting."¹³

The Great Revival was never restricted to adult Christians but quickly spread to children and high school students, especially to those who went to Christian schools. When Silsil (Boy's) School, operated by the Methodists and the Presbyterians, reopened in February of 1907, a similar revival movement broke out among its students. The Holy Spirit movement in this period was even stronger among girls than boys.¹⁴ In other words, the movement of this period was open to all classes of people in all age groups. The revival continued more broadly as people confessed and repented their sins.

Repentance of sins, however, was not the only phenomenon that was involved in their meetings. If the Holy Spirit movement had involved the repentance of sins, then it would not have had much significance or influence on people. What was more significant was the dramatic change in the lives of those who were involved in the revival meetings. They began to quit their bad habits, forgave each other, and made peace with one another. Korean society in general looked at the tremendous change among the Christians with awe and began to expect something from them for the country,¹⁵ as the nation found no hope for independence or help

¹¹ Blair & Hunt, *The Korean Pentecost*, p. 74.

¹² The title of this book is *Pentecost and Other Experiences of the Mission Field*. This little book by William Blair was first printed in 1910 by the Board of Foreign Missions of the Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A. for use of the board and its missions. The book was later edited and reprinted by Bruce Hunt in 1977 with his instructions. See footnote 1.

¹³ Acts 2:1-4. Blair & Hunt, *The Korean Pentecost*, p. 71. However, unlike on the day of Pentecost recorded in the Book of Acts, there is no written record of tongue-speaking in the Great Revival of 1907.

¹⁴ Graham Lee, "How the Spirit came to Pyeng-Yang [Pyongyang]," *Korea Mission Field* 3:3 (March, 1907), p. 36.

¹⁵ We find almost the same record in the community of the apostolic church. See Acts 2:42-47.

for change. Despite such expectations of Korean society, however, the missionaries to Korea were leading the Korean church in a more non-political path as they fully seized the opportunity afforded by the spiritual breakthrough.

The missionaries who had gathered when the revival broke out in Pyongyang went to other parts of the country and led revival meetings. The fire of the Spirit spread in various parts of the nation and brought about powerful zeal for evangelism, thus resulting in the explosive growth of the church.

A number of factors can be cited as contributing to the revival: 1) people wanted to find hope from Christianity while Korea suffered the loss of independence and Japanese oppressive rule; 2) the revival came as a result of rapid westernization; 3) the old religions of Korea had failed the nation and thus Christianity was expected to bring new hope; and 4) there was no great difficulty in the replacement of the old religions by Christianity. Like Confucianism, Christianity teaches righteousness and reveres learning. Like Buddhism, Christianity seeks purity and promises a future life. Like shamanism, Christianity taught that God answers prayer and performed miracles.¹⁶

We should note that the expansion of the revival that had started in Wonsan could be attributed partly to the effort of Sun-Joo Gil. Gil had the experience of the Holy Spirit at the Great Revival in Pyongyang and went all around the country leading revival meetings and classes. His life and ministry deserve careful scholarly attention.

The revival became a national phenomenon. People often talked about it. Where there were Christians, there was revival. Many believed that the revival was a fulfillment of God's promise to Korea. The revival helped to form several characteristics of Korean Christian life: Bible study, prayer, and repentance. The latter have become the most important religious traditions of the Korean church.¹⁷

III. Observations

Summarizing the influence of the Holy Spirit movement during this period, however, we find more positive factors than negative ones.

¹⁶ Owens, *Revival Fires*, p. 25.

¹⁷ Most of church historians in Korea agree with this opinion. For example, see Min, *Hankuk Kidokkyohoesa*, pp. 252-61; Allen, *A History of the Church*, pp. 165-66.

First, it preserved the purity of Korean Christianity. Many Koreans had been converted for various reasons and motives when Protestant Christianity was first introduced toward the end of the nineteenth century. Two decades later, large numbers of these believers felt that they had experienced the fire of the Holy Spirit and thus began to understand what Christianity meant in their daily living. They could also distinguish what was truly Christian from what was not. The revival brought them a great renewal in their thoughts, style of life, and behavior. It was a new birth of the church by the new birth of changed individuals. W. G. Cram noted,

It was genuine. There was no false fire of lies or deceptions. Missionaries never attempted to force the Christians to confess their sins as a necessary evidence of their purity or as a testimony of the Holy Spirit.¹⁸

The Great Revival started from a pure, genuine religious motive. It bore the religious fruit of renewal and purified the church.

Second, the Great Revival raised the ethical standards of Korean Christians to a notable degree. As newborn Christians must act differently than before, so newborn Christians in this revival proved themselves by the changes in their lives. Bishop M. C. Harris, who was in charge of the Korean Methodist churches, filed a positive report about the Holy Spirit movement of this period to the General Assembly of the Methodist Episcopal Church of the United States in 1908.¹⁹

The effects following this movement are wholly good--the church raised to a higher spiritual level, almost entire absence of fanaticism because of previous careful instruction in the Bible; not one case of insanity, but many thousands clothed in their right mind; scores of men called to the holy ministry; greater congregations, searching the Word, as many as two thousand meeting in one place for the study of the Bible; many thousands learning to read, and making inquiries; multitudes of them pressing upon the tired missionary and native

¹⁸ W. G. Cram, "A Genuine Change," *Korea Mission Field* 3:5 (May, 1907), p. 68.

¹⁹ Joseph B. Hingeley, ed., *Journal of the Twenty-fifth Delegated General Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church, Baltimore, MD, May 6-June 1, 1908* (New York: Eaton & Mains, 1908), pp. 861-62. At the World Missionary Conference at Edinburgh, England in June of 1910, the great revival of 1907 was reported to have had the "pure Pentecostal experience." *World Missionary Conference, Report of Commission I* (Edinburgh, 1910), pp. 77-80.

pastors, praying, "Give us to eat." I beseech you do not listen to any word suggestions of doubt as to the vitality and reality of this. Drunkards, gamblers, thieves, adulterers, murderers, self-righteous Confucianists and dead Buddhists, and thousands of devil-worshippers have been made new men in Christ, the old things gone forever.

Third, the Great Revival brought about an explosive growth to the Korean church. Since one of the major characteristics of the revival was a zeal for evangelism, as stated above, the believers could not keep the gospel to themselves. They gave testimonies of their experience of the Holy Spirit to their families, relatives, and friends, proving themselves and the credibility of their testimonies by their changed lives. This led many people to join the movement. In the year between 1906 and 1907, the number of Christians increased tremendously and the growth continued for a few years.

Presbyterian churches achieved 34% of growth, going from 54,987 members (in 1906) to 73,844 (in 1907).²⁰ Methodist churches achieved more rapid growth. The Northern Methodist churches achieved a 118% growth, from 18,107 (in 1906) to 39,613 (in 1907).²¹ Such growth incited the formation of church organizations. The Presbyterian churches organized an independent Korean district in September 1907. The Methodist churches did the same a year later and took care of the administration and business aspects of the district independently of missionary headquarters. While the country was being conquered and spiritually disintegrated by the Japanese, the Korean church was building strong, nation wide structures. The growth of the church during this period led to the global involvement of the church in the Declaration of Independence proclaimed on March 1, 1919.

Fourth, it formed new and unique traditions in the Korean church such as early morning prayer meetings, unison prayer in a loud voice, Bible studies, generous offerings, and zeal for evangelism. The dedication of the Korean Christians for the work of Christ was so genuine that the missionaries envied it.²²

²⁰ Harry A. Rhodes, *History of the Korean Mission Presbyterian Church U.S.A., 1884-1934* (Seoul: Chosen Mission Presbyterian Church, U.S.A., 1934), p. 547.

²¹ Annual Report of M.E.C. (1907), p. 425, quoted in Gil-Sup Song, *History of the Theological Thought in Korea* (Seoul: Christian Literature Society, 1987), p. 157.

²² Song, *History of the Theological Thought*, pp. 157-58.

Fifth, it strengthened the unification of the churches. This Holy Spirit movement was a product of a united spirit. People committed to do it went beyond denominational differences in seeking the gift of the Holy Spirit. When the revival broke out in united conferences of Presbyterians and Methodists in Wonsan, Pyung-yang, and Seoul, they notified one another of upcoming meetings and shared the grace of God. The united work of Presbyterian and Methodist churches in planning and processing the Declaration of Independence on March 1, 1919 may be cited a product of this united spirit.

There was also a negative outcome. The missionaries started limiting the interest of the Korean churches to the internal affairs of the churches in an attempt to de-politicize the Korean church.²³ In fact, as early as 1901, the Presbyterian Mission Board had decided to de-politicize the Korean church, as it was then involved in the independence movement. Since the Korean church came to experience the Holy Spirit, through the force of the revival movement, the missionaries decided to turn the interest and activities of the Korean church to matters of faith and away from political and social matters. This led some of the Korean churches in non-political directions. Consequently, many churches put stress on personal salvation and thus lacked social concern. But other churches were still involved in political matters and took part in the independence movement as actively as before. Despite the efforts of the missionaries to turn the Korean church towards apathy in political matters, the church planned and processed the Declaration of Independence on March 1 in 1919, independently of the missionaries.²⁴

The Japanese used all its power to suppress the movement and persecuted the church. The ruthless power of the Japanese caused Korea's Declaration of Independence to fail. The failure of the independence movement and the subsequent severe persecution by the Japanese of the Korean church influenced the Korean Christians to be more concerned about spiritual matters and future life and made them rather apathetic to political and social matters.

The Great Revival had a great influence on the Korean church. It provided spiritual strength and wisdom for the Korean Christians. By the power of the Holy Spirit, the Korean Christians could endure severe

²³ Kyung-Bae Min, *Hankuk Minjokkyohoe Hyungsungsaron* [*History of Korean Nationalistic Church Formulation*] (Seoul: Yonsei University Press, 1974), pp. 36-54.

²⁴ Institute of Korean Church History Studies, *Hankuk KidokkyouiYyeoksa* [*A History of Korean Church*] (Seoul: Christian Literature Society, 1990), pp. 23-41.

persecutions during the Japanese occupation (1910-1945). Since then, the spirit of the Great Revival has existed during the entire history of the Korean church.