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THE KOREAN DEMOCRATISATION MOVEMENT AND CALVIN

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1. Introduction

History is a process that looks for the future hidden in the past. In order to rethink the legacy of John Calvin in the context of 21st-century North-East Asia, we should begin by exploring the process of how the Korean churches understood Calvin and adopted his thought into their situation in the past.[1]

The Korean church's participation in the democratisation movement of Korean society in the 1970s was a decisive moment for the emergence of the very "Korean" political theology. Particularly, the Korean Presbyterian churches' active involvement in the democratisation movement was rooted in the application of the theology and thought of John Calvin, the founder of Presbyterian theology, into their social context in the 1970s.

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[1] The text was presented as theological reflection at the Northeast-Asia Area Council Meeting and Theological Consultation of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches WARC, November 12-14, 2008.

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This presentation will reveal how Calvinism, and which elements of his theological thought, could influence the Korean Presbyterian churches' active participation in the Korean democratisation movement of the 1970s. Of course, the Korean Presbyterian churches' understanding of Calvin was by no means homogeneous. Different interpretations of Calvin's theology were held, resulting in severe conflicts and the division into two groups: the conservatives and the radicals. So our topic will be helpful, to some extent, in understanding the division of the Korean Presbyterians into conservative versus radical, and also in appreciating the church's creative application of Calvinism.

2. The conflict between the conservatives and radicals in the Korean church

Within the reality of denominational division in the Korean Presbyterian church in the 1960s, each Presbyterian denomination began to actively apply Calvin's theological thought to the Korean political, economic and social context according to its own denominational identity. Consequently, academic research on Calvin's theological thought was pursued and various issues were discussed at the denominational level. Among these issues, the relationship between church and state, and the issues of capitalism and the Christian ethics of Calvin, became the most popular. Two points should be mentioned as the background for this increased concern for Calvinism. First, the Korean Presbyterian church had become mature enough to consider that the church must be responsibly involved in social issues. The ecumenical controversy in 1959, resulting in a further denominational division, was caused by differing views on the church-state relationship. Secondly, in the politically unstable situation of Korean society after the student revolution of April 19, 1960 (19.4 civil revolution) the Korean churches experienced polemical division into two rival groups, conservatives and radicals, in

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terms of the church-state issue. Consequently, theological controversy between the two groups seemed inevitable.

Although the political situation of Korea immediately after liberation from Japan in 1945 was also very unstable, the Korean church at that time enjoyed relative internal unity, compared with other social groups or organisations. Generally speaking, the Christian churches in South Korea tended to support the government. This pro-government position of the Korean churches can be explained by the following three factors: 1) their failure to deal with the issue of the collaboration of many Christians with Japanese imperialism; 2) their sense of religious identity with the U.S. and Rhee Seung-Man, the first President of the Republic of Korea and a church elder as well; 3) the fact that most of the national leaders who had returned from abroad were Christians. Under these circumstances, the Korean church's close relationship with political power was so strong that the National Council of Churches in Korea (NCCK) formed an election campaign committee for the presidential and vice-presidential election in 1952, and declared their official support for the presidential candidate Rhee Seung-Man.

In spite of this general trend of friendly church-state relationships, some Christian leaders during the later period of President Rhee Seung-Man's regime began to insist that the church must criticise the state's perpetration of injustice. With the 19.4 civil revolution against the Rhee Seung-Man government in 1960, many churches in Korea changed their earlier positive view on the state to a critical stance. However, not all the Korean churches turned their back on the government. While insisting on the separation of church and state, many churches still maintained their conservative view on the state. The conservative churches took an apparently indifferent position on political issues, but their compliance with government policy was in fact a form of political action. Some radical theologians opposed the Korean church's political indifference and passive looking-on. They further insisted that not only the church

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but all the Korean people should be the guards of democracy. These differing views on the state associated with ecclesiology consequently reinforced distinctive denominational theology. Particularly the Presbyterian churches tried to reinterpret Calvin's theological thought on ecclesiology, capitalism and social ethics for the justification of their positions.

The military coup d´etat led by General Park Jung-Hee on May 16, 1961 was an incident that undid all the achievements of the 19.4 civil revolution for democratisation. Nevertheless, the Korean church announced a statement through the NCCK that the military coup was an inevitable action against communism and against social inequity and decay. However, such a good relationship between the church and the military government could not last long. When the military proposed a 4-year extension of military government in 1963, the NCCK withdrew its support for the military government and, in a public statement, urged the military to return to their original position, leaving political affairs to civilians. With the struggle against the normalisation of diplomatic relations between South Korea and Japan, this statement was one of the few cases of opposition to the government by the whole Korean church. Nonetheless, Korean history witnessed the emergence of a military government.

The Park Jung-Hee military government adopted two main policies to justify the regime and dispel people's distrust of Park: a cultural policy for the revival of the national culture and an economic policy with a five-year plan for economic development. President Park Jung-Hee boldly decided to try to normalise relations with Japan in order to receive a major loan from Japan, which was supposed to be a must for Korean economic development. However, the decision was followed by strong mass resistance. The Korean church also opposed it. On July 1, 1965 two-hundred radical party theologians including Rev. Kim Jae-Joon, Rev. Kang Won-Young of the PROK and Rev. Han Kyung-Jik of the PCK, gathered together to issue the statement. And the Presbyterian

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Church of Korea (PCK-Hapdong), a denomination representative of the conservative group, joined the resistance movement by calling for a week of prayer from July 4 and a three-day fast from July 8. However, such a unitied reaction of the Korean church against government policies disappeared around the time of the constitutional revision allowing a third term for Park Jung-Hee's presidency. After that, the rivalry between the conservatives and the radicals in the Korean church became more severe and polemic.

3. The Korean democratisation movement and Calvin's theology

In 1969 the Park Jung-Hee military government announced a plan for a constitutional revision. The main purpose was to withdraw the restriction of a two-term presidency and to gain a foothold for a long-term seizure of power. Radical politicians and Christian leaders immediately organised a pan-national committee to campaign against this. Rev. Kim Jae-Joon (PROK) was the chairman, and Mr. Ham Suk-Heon (Quaker) and Rev. Park Hyung-Kyu (PROK) were central figures on the committee. The committee issued a statement emphasising again the crucial prophetic role of the church against injustice. Conservative Christian leaders subsequently also issued a statement. Unlike the radical group, however, they argued that the church should maintain neutrality on political affairs according to the principle of separation of church and state. In addition, they criticised Kim Jae-Joon for his agitating actions that confused ordinary Christians. However, it soon became evident that the political neutrality they insisted on was nothing but a government-patronised position. The Korean Christian Council (KCC), organised by conservative church leaders Rev. Park Hyung-Yong and Rev. Park Yoon-Sun and others, issued a statement proclaiming support for the constitutional amendment. This statement was a clear indication that the

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conservative churches wanted to maintain the status quo in the name of political neutrality. In response, the NCCK made it clear that support of the constitutional amendment was the position only of the KCC, not of the whole Korean church, and that the NCCK could not agree with it. The NCCK position was based on the conviction that "the political situation we face today can never be irrelevant to our faith."

In 1971 Park Jung-Hee proclaimed emergency martial law as a means of perpetuating his presidency, and prohibited all political activities. The following year, the military government formed the National Congress for Independent Reunification and, through it, approved the Yushin (Revitalising Reform) Constitution. The government propagandised a "democracy fitting to Korea" under the new Constitution, but it was, needless to say, contrary to true democracy. Nevertheless, the "New Christian Newspaper", run by the conservative churches, declared in a column series titled "Need for the Constitution for Revitalising Reform" that it would be a chance to create a Korean-style democracy. A conservative theologian, Rev. Dr. Kim Ui-Hwan, a member of the Presbyterian Church of Korea (PCK-Hapdong), justified the Constitution in an article "The matter of the political participation of the Korean church", arguing that "all political actions of the Korean church against the government were wrong, except in religious matters."

In the meantime, the radical group issued a statement in May 1973 thoroughly refuting the conservative group's theory of the separation of church and state. The statement, titled "Declaration of Korean Christians in 1973", confessed that resistance to unjust political suppression and social participation of the church were the ways to proclaim the Kingdom of Messiah on earth. By doing so, it theologically justified the church's participation in social issues. The confrontation between the conservatives and the radicals in the Korean church, caused by differing views on the church's political and social participation, became more se-

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vere the following year, in the controversy about the church-state relationship.

On November 9, 1974 Prime Minister Kim Jong-Pil warned that the church would be punished for its political participation. The NCCK responded by issuing a statement declaring that "When the government tries to perpetuate its power against God's will, the church must denounce cooperation with it and must resist it." In a subsequent statement, the Korean Jesus Council (Hankuk Kidokkyo Hyeobewhae), a conservative association within the conservative group, criticised the NCCK for opposing the government and causing social disorder, insisting that "the church must comply with the government unless the government threatens religious freedom." The Korean Christian Council (KCC) also issued a statement; quoting the call for unconditional submission to the governing authorities, as written in the scriptures in Romans 13, the KCC argued that disobedience to the state is biblically wrong. It even asserted that the anti-government movement was only benefiting communist North Korea.

After 1974 there were few chances to seek a compromise between the conservatives and radicals in the Korean Presbyterian churches on the issue of the relationship between church and state. The conservative side maintained their pro-government position at the expense of the church's prophetic mission. The Christian press was also generally loyal to the government. On the other hand, the radical group led a strong anti-government movement for democracy and human rights. In the process of this struggle, the radical group had a chance to indigenise Calvin's political theology in the Korean context.

One of the fundamental reasons why the conservative party in the Presbyterian churches stood for the government can be found in their strong desire to protect their vested rights by maintaining the status quo. A no less significant reason, however, lies in the theological misunderstanding of both the principle of the separation of church and state, and

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the state theory in Romans 13. The principle of the separation of church and state can be interpreted in two ways in terms of its logic: 1) The state must not intervene in religious matters. 2) The church must not be involved in political affairs. The conservative group held only the latter position. But John Calvin who established theocracy in Geneva opposed the government's arbitrary legislation of religion and worship. Calvin's opposition implies that the government as a human agency cannot restrict the church arbitrarily because all power belongs to God. Thus according to Calvin's theology, the principle of the separation of church and state should be interpreted as meaning the former position: that the state must not intervene in religious matters. If the state violates this rule, the church can legitimately criticise the state in the light of theocracy.

Romans 13, a key biblical text for the state theory, denies the absoluteness of any human power by declaring that all authority comes from God. The Apostle Paul in this text sees secular governors as servants of God and defines the limit of human power. The text thus allows the interpretation that the church can resist the state according to conscience bestowed by God, if the state violates God's will and human conscience. On the basis of this hermeneutical position on state theory, most Calvinists in church history could establish new political systems limiting the state's power and gain the fame of reformers. In this regard, the conservative Presbyterian Church’s theology of the state is inconsistent with Calvin's theological thought in some aspects.

4. Creative adoption of Calvin's theology and the confession of faith

Under the system of the Yushin Constitution, the theological foundation of the resistant churches was Calvin's political theology and eth-

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ics. The Christians and theologians who adopted radical elements in Calvin′s theology, especially his thought on capitalism and state theory, and the relations between church and state, did not confine the matter merely to the theological realm, but extended it to level of the profession of faith in the church communities. The PROK's 'Confession of Faith' published in 1972 was the first fruit of such activities. This Confession as a historic document in the Korean church and follows along the lines of confessions of faith by other member churches of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches': confessions such as the Geneva Confession, the second Hevetic Confession and the Westminster Confession. Its more important meaning, however, lay in the fact that it provided Korean Christians participating in the democratisation movement with a basis of social mission and "acting" faith.

The PROK Confession consisted of an introduction and nine chapters and was based on the Incarnation (John 1:14) and the Servant God (*kenosis* Christology, Philippians 2:6-11). The purpose of this Confession, it said, was to disclose the truth of the Christian Gospel again in the midst of desperate evil surroundings and to seek a way to obey Christ.

The triune God found in the Scriptures is neither dogmatic nor a Being of the past. God still works today in the contradictory history of humankind for re-creation, redemption, liberation and healing. God takes care of all things in the universe and the created world in God's good will and providence. God is the Lord of all existence and wants to alone be worshipped. Dictatorship is a revolt against God's divine providence and a betrayal of the lordship of Jesus Christ. It is a sin arising from human selfishness and arrogance (Genesis 3:5; Romans 7:5-25). The evil of sin is universal and independently leads humankind and society into decay and corruption. Moreover, as it constructs social power and affects all humankind with unified force, it often reveals itself in a structural form against which no individual can stand. Biblical

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law condemns such sin and the existence of evil. Only Jesus Christ can redeem humankind and society through His passion and death. His death as the summit of His passion is an expression of God's righteous love; it is an attack on cosmic evil and the power of sin leading the human into a desperate destiny; it is liberation from evil, and is reconciliation between God and person; and it is a decisive action for forgiveness of sins and salvation (Romans 1:1; 3:24; Galatians 1:4; 1 Peter 2:18).

Jesus Christ, being in very nature God, made himself nothing and took the very nature of a servant. The PROK Confession, based on *kenosis* Christology, suggested Jesus' life for others, service and self-sacrifice as a model for the Christian life. Thus, the object of Jesus Christ's service and sacrifice for us is that we do the same. The object of Jesus' service is indeed the world and others (neighbours) in the world. The Confession here claimed the kingship of Jesus Christ. Beyond the Korean church's traditional understanding of the dualistic principle of separation of church and state, the Confession suggested a theological foundation of Christian mission for the world. Of course, such a confession was possible under the direct influence of the *Missio Dei* theology, which defined the subject of mission as God's, the field of mission as the world, and the purpose of mission as humanisation.

In this regard, the Confession interpreted the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the perspective of political theology. Resurrection means that death as the final enemy of human beings has been swallowed up in life, and also means the victory of justice and love. That is, it means the recovery of those who suffered under oppressive injustice and violation of the law, the victory of the righteous defeated and the new life of the dead. Therefore, Christians must be friends of the weak and must take Jesus Christ's role of standing against social injustice and the structures of evil power. That is indeed a way of participation in Christ's passion and the new life of Christians in the Holy Spirit.

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The Confession declared that the holiness of the church lay in working with Christ in the world and bearing trials for the transformation of the world. The church as the body of Jesus Christ is faithful only to Christ. Such faithfulness appears as missionary activity, the Lord's Great Commandment. Mission has two dimensions: one for the gathered church, and the other for the sending church. While worshipping and sharing fellowship in the gathered **c**hurch, Christians work with Christ in the world in the sending church. In this, the Confession distinguished itself from the general Korean church trend of focusing mainly on church growth, without involvement in history.

The Confession was confirmed as the official Confession of the PROK in 1978 after a five-year review by the presbyteries. At the peak of the democratisation movement in Korean society the Confession inspired not only the PROK but many radical Christians beyond the PROK, strengthening their pride in and conviction of the church's role and responsibility in society.

Conclusion

In the Korean context, Calvin's theology contributed greatly to the democratisation movement of 1970s by providing a theoretical foundation for political theology and Christian social ethics. In the process, however, the radical churches' creative adoption of Calvin's theology must also be appreciated. While the conservative churches' understanding of the church-state relationship is close to Luther's two-kingdom theology, the radical churches saw the state in the light of Calvin's theory of God's absolute sovereignty and Christ's kingship. The radical churches creatively adopted Calvin's political theology and social ethics and successfully made them a theological basis for the Christian social movement.

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In a sense, this presentation may be incomplete, for I cannot deal here with the statements and confessions presented by the Korean church after the 1970s. It might be an interesting task to explore how, and how much, the traditional Reformed Church's confessions influenced these. Let us leave that task for the future.