New Missions in a New Land:
Korean-American Churches and Overseas Missions

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My fellow pastor, who has completed his graduate study in missiology a couple of years ago, could not join my flight to this conference from Chicago yesterday. It is because he is in charge of a series of fundraising events at his church this weekend such as a rummage sale, a teenagers’ car wash, and luncheon meetings. These events are planned for the church’s mission trips to Haiti in the coming summer. This year, three teams are organized for the mission trips, but a group smaller than previous years because the church has skipped a mission trip to a sister church on a reservation in Minnesota this year. His church is a local Korean-American church in a Chicago suburb.

This story is not new for Korean-American Protestants. Korean-American churches have sent and supported missionaries to the overseas fields. “A” church in the Chicago suburbs with 600 in weekly attendances supported 40 missionaries and organizations and sent three of their own missionaries, with a leading role in a Christian-based NGO for poor children in the Third World. “B” church (350 in attendance), which I mentioned above as my fellow pastors church, is sending two missionaries and runs one grade school in Haiti and one seminary in Nepal. Both churches keep an annual fund for foreign missions, mission trips and revivals for overseas missions. Both churches spend a third of their yearly budget for overseas missions. These examples are not different from other Korean-American churches which have their involvement at various levels and in diverse ways for foreign missions. Fairly small churches of 30-40 members also put their efforts into foreign missions, usually cooperating with other churches and mission societies. This phenomenon of missionary effort is not uncommon among Korean-American churches everywhere in the U. S.

This presentation will explore Korean-American Protestant churches and their overseas’ missions. The main question of this project is why are Korean-American Protestant churches are so passionate and vibrant for overseas’ missions? To seek an answer to this question, my working argument is that Korean-American Protestants have adopted overseas’ missions as their ministry priority in their new land. The purpose of this project is to explain the historical layers that have developed into today’s missionary practices among Korean-American churches. This is my brief overview at a glance.
Korean-American churches consist of small local and ethnic churches. The churches have histories going back 40 years or are mostly younger as the U. S. immigration was open to Asians since 1965 and most members are immigrants who are still in the process of adjustment and settlement. Again the small immigrant churches are so much investing their prayers, hearts, and sources for overseas missions, why?

The first explanation comes with the fact that Koreans brought their missionary mind and practices from the mother land. Korean Protestantism began in the 1880s and the young American missionaries were influential teachers of theology and the practices of early Korean Protestant churches. Most of the missionaries including the first who arrived: Horace G. Underwood, Gerhardt Apenzeller, William Reynolds, and Samuel Moffett, were sons of the American missionary movement of the late 19th century led by D. L. Moody, Arthur T. Pierson, and John Mott. Dae Young Ryu states that a half of early missionaries who helped establish churches and schools in Korea came directly from the Student Volunteer Movement (SVM). Their emphases on the missionary mind and practices through evangelism, church planting, revivalism, and foreign missions were deeply imprinted on to Korean Protestantism, and the young churches accepted that the Great Commission advanced through evangelism and missions was the first purpose of the congregation.

The emphasis on missions has permeated the history of Korean Protestantism. Korean Protestantism rapidly grew in the number of churches and members in a century. Today, about 20% of Koreans have identified themselves as Protestants and Protestantism has become the most influential religion in the country. But in the history of Korea this has always been the experience of the minority. As a minority religion, evangelism and revivalism have been the major instruments the churches can use to compete with Confucianism, Buddhism, and scientific atheism. This experiential history resulted in a strong heritage of evangelical faith and practices so that 95% of Korean Protestant churches prefer to be called “evangelical,” although the understandings of evangelicalism are often different for different groups. The evangelical emphasis consequently formed the Korean Church’s evangelical faith and practices, such as early morning prayer meetings, Tongsung prayer, the church growth movement, and also missionary zeal in order to send missionaries to foreign lands for evangelism, church planting, education, and medical missions.
The evangelical consensus of the Korean churches developed into a foreign missionary movement. In the nation-wide revivalisms in the eighties, Timothy Lee observes the changes of the Korean Church’s catchphrase for evangelism, from “Thirty millions to Christ,” which proposed home missions in the Korean peninsula to foreign fields into the world. “Evangelization of the Nation Today to the Evangelization of the world tomorrow,” was the main theme of World Evangelization Crusade of Korea in 1980. It paralleled the national pride and economic growth among Koreans as well. In the year 1988, when Koreans hosted the summer Olympic games, Yonggi Cho interpreted national development and church growth, preaching “Therefore Korea, as a nation in the world, as a nation that offers sacrifices at the end of time, must spread Christ throughout the world.” Now Korean Protestants are very active in sending and supporting overseas missionaries, appointing over 20,000 (24,747) missionaries in 169 countries according to the Korean World Mission Association in December, 2012.

Missionary zeal and practices of Korean-American Protestants are not new for Koreans. They have their roots in their history in Korea, and continue the work in a new place because they believe that missions are the main work of local churches.

A second explanation is that the Korean-American experience of immigration strengthened their evangelical mind and missionary practices. Although the first wave of immigration began in 1903, today’s Korean-American community is mostly the result of post-1965 immigration policies. Protestants were never a majority in Korea, at most only 20% of the whole population. But here in the U. S. 60% of Koreans identify themselves as Protestants. Some factors have influenced this phenomenon. Urban middle class Koreans preferred to immigrate to the U. S. and the portion of Protestants among these immigrants was greater than that of the rural low or high classes. Many immigrants were open to Protestantism as an American religion in the process of settlement and assimilation. Even though they were small and spread out, churches also serve as social and cultural centers and formed extended families, building “little Koreas” as well as being a religious institution. Korean Christians keep their evangelistic zeal and practices through inviting, serving, and educating fellow Korean immigrants. As the immigrants increased, Korean-American churches grew and Korean children increasing identified with Protestantism.
Korean-American Protestants developed their own theologies from their immigration experiences. For those who tried to make their American dream real and struggled with cultural assimilation, social degradation, racial discrimination, and hard work, the Christian faith provided a religious, psychological, and social haven and encouraged them by interpreting their difficulties through a theological framework. Sang Hyun Lee understands immigration as God’s spiritual calling to pilgrimage. Through the experiences of marginality by recent immigrants, God has called Koreans to be His people and to live out their pioneering responsibility in this new land. Encountering the fact that the U. S. is losing its Protestant distinctiveness, as Kown, Kim and Stephen Warner argue, Korean Protestants find their missionary role by gathering as a strong faith community, building ethnic churches, and sharing their faith with neighbors.

The missionary roles of Korean American Churches always include overseas missions. According to a study by Chang Kim and Chul Chang, the first organized, intentional, short-term mission team was sent in 1984 from the Global Mission Church (Baptist) in Maryland, and since then there has been a ripple effect with more than 50,000 Korean-Americans who have participated in short-term missions over a decade. Furthermore, Korean-American churches are getting more interested in foreign missions projects. As Protestant institutions, local churches planned and worked out their own programs. As individual Protestants, Korean-Americans can find their involvement in missionary work in various ways. They took advantage of their in-between experiences as Korean immigrants in the U. S. They are familiar with travel and foreign culture, and they can speak at least two languages, Korean and English. These advantages enable them to utilize a Korean missionary network from Korea which focuses on Asian countries and from America which focuses on many Latin American locations. Foreign missions is now a growing movement among Korean-American churches.

How can we interpret the growth of an overseas missionary movement among Korean-American churches? Why do they look towards a distant land rather than work on issues in this country?

At a glance, this missionary movement looks like the American movement in the late 19th century that influenced the establishment of the first Protestant churches in Korea. Both had more of a traditional understanding of evangelism
and conversion, regarding other missionary endeavors as auxiliary methods rather than primary goals. The missionary views are interwoven with their home church’s revivalism, church growth, and national or ethnic pride. Korean-Americans today and American Protestants in the 19th century share Calvinistic understandings of themselves as a people chosen for missions in their generation, interpreting their spiritual blessing and materialistic success.

However, Korean-American churches are minority churches. Their faith experiences are based on their immigrant and minority communities in the U. S. including the visible and invisible walls they have faced between their churches and other U. S. institutions. Language and communication is the most different obstacle for the churches, even between 1st generation immigrants and their children. The churches enjoy their ethnic clusters on Sunday morning, stepping away from their uneasy daily life as strangers or sometimes second-class citizens. The ministry has been busy taking care only of other Korean immigrants. They are checking the Korean news everyday and are crazy about the national soccer team the World cup. An immigrant church is an ethnic island of comfort, kinship, and faith surrounded by the sea of the U. S. society.

In the eyes of islanders, the outside of the island is water. If the islanders are filled with evangelical zeal, they have to look for their ends of the world. If the islanders want to reach other lands, they have to cross the seas. For the islanders who are Korean-Americans, reaching people of other languages and other cultures is overseas missions even though they are physically living only one block away. It is a question for Korean-Americans of which is easier and more meaningful; to be missionaries to American neighbors who they live with, or to send and support foreign missions where they can travel and cooperate with other Korean missionaries. The major concern here is what we can do for the mission and what the field needs from the missionaries, not how far they live from here. For Korean-Americans, the U. S. has enough churches and mission source. It was very hard for Korean-Americans to reach their community as white churches can. But in foreign lands such as Asia and Latin America, urgent needs are waiting for missions which Korean-Americans can join. Yes, it is farther away but it is easier to cross the social and psychological seas. With the missionary heritage from Korea and the immigrant’s experiences in America, it is my point that many Korean-American Protestant churches intentionally or unintentionally have adopted
overseas missions as the priority of ministry, while leaving missionary work in American society to individual efforts.

Two historical examples tell a common story with today’s Korean-American missionary movement. One is the African-American missionary zeal for the African continent in the 19th century. African-American descendents in America particularly had a strong feeling for the evangelization of Africans. Although they experienced urgent struggles against slavery and the risks of a colonizationist scheme, they came together and organized missions for the African continent. For example, A. W. Hanson in a national convention in 1841 showed spiritual interest and interpreted the meaning of foreign missions to Africa claiming: “the destiny of black Americans was ultimately connected with the regeneration of Africa.” They shared the evangelical zeal of American Protestantism’s white churches in the 19th century, but their mission priority was African people. They had sense of spiritual responsibility and it was possible to participate in African missions. It would be a long and difficult task to change America into a better Christian nation for black people. But now they could share their faith, sometimes with education and science, and devote their lives for African people more effectively than going to white Americans. Through the experience of slavery and faith, they believed that missions to Africa was their destiny from God. James T. Holly, an African-American leader of Haitian missions, maintained in 1859 that for African descendents to “refuse to make any and every sacrifice to advance the interests and prosperity of that nation is to be a traitor both to God and humanity.”

Another historical example is the “women’s work for women” missionary movement in American missions. Although women played a significant role in missionary societies and supported the first stage of American missions, many women had to join missions as missionary wives. “Women’s work for women” respected significant leading roles for woman missionaries especially in the evangelization and civilization of non-Christian women. For example, Mary Scranton (1832-1909), a missionary from the Northern Methodists, established the first modern girls’ school in Korea in the year 1886 and taught Korean girls to be leaders of the Korean church and society. Matie Tate, the first female Southern Presbyterian missionary to Korea in 1893, worked for women’s meetings and taught a changing life in baptism. But in the America of their time, female students could hardly learn theology with male students, and it took several more decades to
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obtain ordained leadership in their churches. But they could be effective leaders in foreign fields. This was also the experience of minorities in missions.

The minority experiences of missionary zeal have sometimes encouraged Christians to be active in overseas missions beyond just reaching out to neighbors and changing themselves. Like African-Americans and the women’s missionary movement in the 19th century, today’s Korean-American Protestants, a minority church, pursue their vision of mission with the sympathy of a minority people in both religion and resources. It is an example of ethnic and immigrant church’s mission to other ethnic churches.

The young Korean pastor is now selling stuff and washing cars to increase funds for summer mission trips. The event is not passing without raising many questions: Can they get enough money? Do they need more events? Can the younger generation continue these missionary efforts? Can the church avoid just repeating traditional evangelism? How can they develop ecumenical and cooperative missions? What missions they can do for American society, and how long will church growth and missions go together? And what contribution can they make in world missionary history? With their Korean evangelical history and their immigrant experiences, Korean-American immigrant churches believe and practice overseas missions as the call of this generation for today.
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