**Introduction to Korea**

South Korea, once known as the Hermit Kingdom of the East, is today one of the most influential players on the global stage. Many of you might have heard the popularity of K-pop and Korean dramas, which has taken over much of the world by storm. Furthermore, South Korea was not that long ago on the brink of economic collapse. But today, it has reinvented itself into one of the world’s most prosperous by taking advantage of revitalization opportunities after the Korean War in 1953 and then again after the IMF crisis in 1997.

Korea now holds the 12th largest GDP in the world (~$1.6 trillion) despite having only a population of approximately 52 million people.[[1]](#footnote-0) And during this time of economic revitalization, Christianity has rapidly grown in South Korea. Though only about 2% of the population in 1945 was considered Christian (that’s the entire Korean peninsula, North and South), in 2022, nearly 20% of South Korea’s population identifies as Protestant Christian.

But the Korean peninsula is also a story of two kingdoms. North Korea is largely considered to be among the world’s poorest countries and run by one of the most oppressive communist regimes of all time. Nearly half of the nation’s 26 million people live in extreme poverty and nearly a third of children in North Korea have stunted growth and various health issues due to malnutrition and starvation. Most people in the country have never tasted meat because it is an unaffordable luxury, subsisting on rice and corn. Most homes are heated by open and polluted fireplaces with no plumbing. And if you are one of the few fortunate people who have access to electricity, it’s often only for a few hours each day because the power grid is unreliable and sporadic.

And as you probably already know, North Korea is extremely unfriendly to any form of religion, except to the worship of the Supreme Leader (Kim Jong Un) and his father and grandfather. The sad irony of all this is that North Korea was once considered the epicenter of Christian revival. Pyongyang, the current capital of North Korea, was once even known as the “Jerusalem of Asia.” In fact, the mother of Kim Il Sung (the first communist leader of North Korea - Kim Jong Un’s grandfather) was actually a Presbyterian deaconess at her church in Pyongyang and his grandfather was a pastor. Today, though it’s hard to know the exact number, maybe 1% of North Korea’s population is estimated to be Christian.

But how did we get here? That’s the story we’re going to be jumping into this morning. This week in the Global Christianity core seminar, we’re going to study how the Gospel broke into the Korean Peninsula – first in the North, then in the South.

Why should you care about Christianity in Korea? Five quick reasons:

1. Because it’s an amazing story of God’s grace that simply cannot be explained away by any economic or sociological phenomenon.
2. We’re also studying it because it’s an example of how faithful missions work can lead to a great movement of healthy churches.
3. We’re studying this story because many of our church members trace their lineage – and often their faith – back to Korea.
4. We’re studying this story because the divergent outcomes in the North and South – at least for today – illustrate God’s mysterious wisdom.
5. Finally, we’re studying it so that we can pray more intelligently for God’s mercy in this part of the world.

So let’s start with the origins of Christianity in Korea.

**1800-1900: The Arrival of Early Presbyterian missionaries**

The very first record of missionaries to arrive in Korea were actually Catholic Jesuit missionaries in the late 1770s. However, Catholicism was quickly stamped out as a result of persecution and xenophobia.

In the mid-19th century, Protestant missionaries in China increasingly came into contact with Koreans along the border of Manchuria. That’s the section of Northeast China that borders modern day North Korea. You can see this on the map in the back of your handouts. The most influential of these missionaries was a Scottish Presbysterian missionary named John Ross.

Ross, through the help of a team of Korean merchants, translated the New Testament into Korean, and in 1882 the first portions of the New Testament were published and distributed all across Northwest Korea. By 1887, the entire Korean New Testament was bound as a single volume and sent out along the Yalu River, which today runs along the borders of China and North Korea. In fact, many important theological terms that Ross established are still used by Koreans today. For example the word Hananim, which means God, is still used today. Someone comparable to Ross would be William Tyndale who made a tremendous impact on our modern English Bibles and even the English language itself.

There’s two things I want to highlight here about what Ross did because I think he had some incredible foresight that helped establish the early Korean church.

First, Ross was convinced that the most important part of missionary work was getting people the Word of God. That’s why he spent so much time and effort translating the Bible into Korean and prioritizing its distribution. He focused on finding native Korean speakers who could help him, he then learned the language, and finally let the Word of God go forward because he trusted God’s promise that His Word would not come back empty-handed.

Second, Ross was convinced that the best way to spread Christianity was through local converts rather than foreign missionaries. He believed that evangelism by Koreans to other Koreans would serve as the most compelling witness to the power of the Gospel.

Ross’ work then established a basis for the first truly resident Protestant missionaries to arrive in Korea several years later. In the 1880s and 1890s, Presbyterian missionaries like Horace Allen and Horace Underwood landed in the country and helped start the first churches, schools, and medical institutions that remain some of Korea’s top institutions today. For example, Ewha Women’s University (the Wellesley of Korea) and Yonsei University were founded by these early missionaries and still have mandatory Christian classes and required attendance at chapel services. That’s like if Harvard University today was still evangelical. (Fun fact: the acronym for the top three colleges in Korea is SKY - Seoul National University, Korea University, and Yonsei University. Young students are often encouraged to reach for the SKY.)

Another important event happened during this time. In the spring of 1890, John Nevius, a Presbyterian missionary in Shandong, China was invited to explain to Korean missionaries his missionary methodology on establishing self-propagating, self-governing, and self-supporting churches. Much of this Nevius methodology were lessons learned from the mistakes made in the earlier missionary work in China. Many missionaries in China had retained control for far too long over local converts, leading to an unhealthy dependence on the Westerners and a shortage of native church leaders.

After this talk, the Nevius Method (aka the Three Self-Plan everywhere outside of Korea) became the established ethos for Protestant missions in Korea. The methodology can largely be distilled down to these five points:

1. Christians should continue to live in their neighborhoods and pursue their occupations, being self-supporting and witnessing to their co-workers and neighbors. (Rather than being pulled away to Western-run missions stations upon conversion.)
2. Missionaries should only develop programs and institutions that the native church desired and could support.
3. The native churches should identify and support their own pastors.
4. Churches should be built in the local style with money and materials given largely by its own church members.
5. Intensive biblical and doctrinal instruction should be provided for church leaders every year.

In many ways, the Nevius method is a direct rebuke to our modern missions methods. Nevius emphasized the establishment and self-sufficiency and governance of native churches so that they might see long-term success and fruit rather than focusing on numbers or quick, but often temporary results.

Now let’s move onto the next significant period of Christianity in Korea.

**1900-1910: Rapid Christian Growth and the Korean Pentecost (aka the Pyongyang Revival of 1907)**

In 1894 Japan invaded Korea and it lost its independence as a country. Japan would go on to occupy Korea for the next half century though it wasn’t officially annexed until 1910. However, the early 20th century also coincided with the beginnings of major church growth and conversions. It seems that Japan’s occupation, though it was a national tragedy and brought about great suffering for many Koreans, also opened up a rare opportunity for the Gospel to advance in the country. Specifically, though Koreans had always been wary of Western missionaries, Japanese occupation led many to look to these missionaries for help and support. But it wasn’t just the love and compassion of the missionaries that won them over, it was the Gospel that won them to Christ. There are countless testimonies of how the divine message of the cross resonated with these Koreans as they found a much greater heavenly hope in the face of their earthly suffering and defeat.

A foundation for revival had been laid. Missionaries traveled from church to church, teaching and training until many were self-sustaining. They would also run annual winter Bible classes in central locations so that Christians from many different villages could attend. The most promising students then would be elevated for further training in the hopes of putting them into church leadership. This eventually led to the creation of a formal seminary in Pyongyang and colleges in Seoul. Most of the conversions missionaries saw were in the Northern provinces and concentrated in Pyongyang.

In 1907, a special outpouring of the Holy Spirit was reported in Pyongyang, with many coming to know Christ. Through great evangelistic zeal and the mercy of God, nearly 1% of the Korean population was estimated to be Christian (Protestant) by 1910. Though this seems like a really small number, two perspectives help us see how amazing this revival was:

1. Most of the East was still quite closed off from the West. What’s more, Japan and Korea were extremely xenophobic and disliked Western influences. So the growth of Christianity had to contend with significant headwinds from both Korean culture and their Japanese occupiers. By comparison, Christianity has been around far longer in Japan, yet to this day Japan has never even been close to being 1% Christian (current Protestant % in Japan is 0.4%).
2. We have to remember that in 1907, the first finished translation of the New Testament in Korean had only been around for about 20 years. So to see this many conversions and churches established so quickly in a nation that had been closed off to Christianity and really any Western influence is remarkable.

Let me share an account of what one Korean pastor, Pastor Lee, experienced during the Pyongyang Revival of 1907. And just an aside, I’ve been struck by how many of these accounts sound so similar to the accounts of the Great Revival that happened in the U.S. during the 1730s and 40s. In this particular account, Pastor Lee writes down what he witnessed at a prayer meeting:

*Man after man would rise, confess his sins, break down and weep, and then throw himself to the floor and beat the floor with his fists in perfect agony of conviction. My own cook tried to make a confession, broke down in the midst of it, and cried to me across the room: “Pastor, tell me, is there any hope for me, can I be forgiven?” and then he threw himself to the floor and wept and wept, and almost screamed in agony. Sometimes after a confession, the whole audience would break out in 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 in uncontrollable weeping, and we would all weep, we could not help it. And so the meeting went on until two o’clock a.m., with confession and weeping and praying*.[[2]](#footnote-1)

But where there is genuine Christian growth and spiritual fruit, Satan is also there, prowling around like a roaring lion, ready to oppose the church as we see in this next period of Korean history.

**1910-1950: The Japanese Occupation and Soviet Communism**

Throughout the rest of the Japanese occupation until 1945, the Korean people experienced a lot of ethnic persecution and Christians experienced even worse persecution, though the church still managed to grow to become nearly 3% of the population by 1945.

This persecution of Christians seems to have had two major causes:

1. The Japanese viewed Christians as being political conspirators. The Japanese government viewed Christians as the worst of Korean nationalists and were worried about their influence in the country because they seemed so well-organized and singularly united around the Gospel message.
2. There’s what is known as the Shinto Shrine Controversy. In 1925, the construction of the Chosen Shinto shrine was completed (Chosen was Japan’s imperialistic name for Korea). Though Japan claimed that bowing down at the Shinto shrine was a primarily patriotic act and not a religious one, Korean Christians were now put in the doubly terrible position of potentially compromising on their Korean nationalism if they bowed down in loyalty towards their imperialistic oppressors and on their religious convictions because they viewed Shinto worship as idolatrous.

So like the narrative of Daniel 3, in which King Nebuchadnezzar throws Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego into the furnace for not bowing down to his golden image, Korean Christians were also persecuted for not bowing down to idols. For two decades, until the end of Japanese occupation in 1945, Korean Christians were imprisoned and tortured for their Christian convictions. The Japanese regime forced the Presbyterian General Assembly to pass a resolution in 1938 saying that shrine worship did not compromise Christian faith, and other denominations like the Methodists did the same.

But even after these resolutions, many Korean Christians did not acquiesce. Nearly two thousand Protestants were arrested for noncompliance and at least fifty people died as martyrs, mostly from torture and starvation. Many missionaries were deported from the country for refusing to support the shrine. Many Christian schools and churches were closed, some churches were even sold off to be turned into Shinto shrines.

Though Japanese occupation ended in 1945 with the end of World War II, peace was not yet at hand. At the end of the war, the Korean peninsula was divided into two zones of occupation along the 38th parallel. North Korea became occupied by Soviet Russia and the southern zone was occupied by Americans. Which leads us now to the beginning of the Korean War and the Modern Era.

**1950-2022: The Modern Era - The Korean War, Rapid Church Growth, the Korean Missionary Movement,**

The Korean War lasted from 1950 until an armistice was signed in 1953, and it was brutal for both the North and the South. Seoul was actually captured four separate times. People often don’t know this, but by many measures, the Korean War was the most destructive conflict of the modern era. There were 3 million war fatalities and it had a much larger proportion of civilian casualties than either World War II or the Vietnam War.

However, after the war, peace and prosperity grew in the South as South Korea began a period of relative autonomy. And in the 1960s, Christianity really started to grow. It doubled in size from 3% to 6% of the population (1.9 million people) by the late 1960s and continued to grow at a frenzied pace until about 20% of the population identified as Protestant Christian by 1995 (which is roughly where South Korea remains the same today).[[3]](#footnote-2) Interestingly, nearly 61% of Korean Americans (Koreans who have immigrated to the U.S. and their children) identify as Protestant Christian as of 2012. Today, South Korea is known for its many megachurches and supposedly the world’s largest church.

What caused this massive growth? Ultimately only God knows, but throughout the 1960s, there was a huge increase of social and evangelistic outreach programs from churches. Here’s just a small sampling:

* Outreach programs to prostitutes and day laborers
* Korean churches begin sending out foreign missionaries (I’ll expand on this topic in a minute)
* Provision of relief and foreign aid to other countries
* Establishment of a nationwide Christian radio network called the Christian Broadcasting System
* Support for education and higher education - 31 universities and 225 schools had been established by Christians by the end of the 20th century. Though there’s certainly East Asian and Confucian influences for why Koreans valued education so much, it was actually primarily Christians who encouraged the pursuit of higher education so that people might better understand their Bibles.
* Lastly, in the 1970s, when a very authoritarian administration came into power under the third president of South Korea, Park Chung Hee, much of the opposition to this undemocratic form of government came from Christians, who knew from Scripture that a government should pursue justice and fairness. This Christian political movement seems to have moved many towards a more positive view of Christianity.

So much of this great Christian growth was fueled by evangelistic zeal. And arguably the most evident way we see this play out is in the number of missionaries that are sent out by South Korea. Today, the country is one of the largest exporters of the Gospel around the world. From 1980 to 2012, the number of missionaries that Korea sent out increased nearly eighteen fold. It went from 100 in 1980, 1,000 in 1989, 10,000 in 2002, and 20,000 in 2012. Today, Korean missionaries are serving in nearly 180 different countries. And according to the missiologist Steve Moon, the large majority of Korean missionaries are convinced that the original Three-Self Plan / Nevius Method (the churches should be self-governing, self-supporting, and self-propagating) are still relevant and critical for church planting and church growth.[[4]](#footnote-3) Though, it’s not exactly clear how well these missionaries apply these principles in the places they serve.

But, what about the state of the church in South Korea today? Much like what we see with evangelicalism in America, Christianity in Korea is a really mixed bag.[[5]](#footnote-4) When examining the church there, I’m reminded of the parable of the wheat and the tares (weeds) from Matthew 13. In this parable, the Lord tells the workers to allow both the wheat and the tares to grow until the time of harvest, alluding to the day of judgment.

There does seem to be a lot of genuine fruit in Korea. In the late 2000s, some Christians thought that the church had actually saturated the entire population of the country (some people even argued that there was no need for additional churches to be planted). There’s around 50,000 churches in South Korea, about one for every 1,000 residents, which is roughly the same as in the United States, but Korea is much more densely populated.

Today, Seoul, the capital of Korea is home to the largest Baptist, Presbyterian, Methodist, and Assemblies of God churches in the world. A single city is home to four of the world’s largest churches.[[6]](#footnote-5) Korea is still largely Presbyterian due to those early missionary influences, which means there are many good remnants and structures of Reformed theology inside of most Korean churches. For example, the majority of Korean evangelicals have an extremely high view of Scripture and affirm the inerrancy of the Bible. They also confess Reformed creeds and confessions.

But church growth and economic growth happened at the same time for South Korea. As a result, the Prosperity Gospel became a massive snare for the country as it began to lift itself out of poverty. To an extent, a correlation between economic growth and church growth makes sense. Those who become Christians will likely take on the famous Protestant work ethic and work diligently and sacrificially. They’ll probably be good and productive employees. But what also happened was that in the 1960s and 70s, all the Western churches were pouring money into the Korean churches and many Koreans began to inadvertently think, “Ah, if we become a Christian nation like America, then we can also become rich because God will bless us.” And, combine this with the global rise of Pentecostalism, we see the ugly duo of the Prosperity Gospel and the Charismatic movement take over many Korean churches.

For example, Korea’s largest church is called Yoido Full Gospel Church, an Assemblies of God church. At its peak it claimed a membership of 830,000 people and it is a massive proponent of prosperity theology. Furthermore, the church’s former pastor, Yong-gi Cho was later accused of embezzling $12 million from the church. Scandals like these have plagued many megachurches in Korea. As a result of such scandals and the rise of secularism, Christianity in Korea, like Christianity in the West (America and Europe), is on the decline with many young people leaving the church.

So how much of this church growth is true Christianity? It’s hard to say. There is a remnant of many faithful Gospel preaching churches in the country. But all too often, it would seem, churches that use the same Bibles and affirm the same Gospel can actually end up obscuring and distracting people away from the Gospel – a problem that’s sadly familiar to us in the States.

As we close out our time for today, I want to leave you with some final thoughts and lessons from the spread of Christianity in Korea.

**Lessons from Christianity in Korea**

1. Past church growth or revival is no guarantee of future spiritual growth.
   1. North Korea was the epicenter of Christianity before the Korean War. It is shocking to see how the church was so quickly stamped out in North Korea by an oppressive regime. We should praise God for the spiritual growth God gives, but not presume on his blessings. We should also thank God for the gifts of religious freedom and good government.
   2. And even in the South where there was such amazing church growth, growth today is stagnant and slightly on the decline.
2. Our missionaries must be well-equipped and taught good missiology.
   1. I am so thankful for the first Presbyterian missionaries who had a long-term mindset in their approach to missions. The Three-Self Plan, investing resources in order to translate God’s Word, and not being obsessed with quick numbers and growth were critical for helping establish Christianity in Korea.
3. Not all “growth” is good growth.
   1. Though so much good has come out of the growth of Christianity in Korea, it has also given birth to some of the world’s largest cults and Prosperity Gospel churches.
4. Material prosperity can often become a major snare for the church.
   1. The Prosperity Gospel became a massive snare for South Korea as it began to lift itself out of poverty. We should examine ourselves and the type of theology that we are implicitly teaching others through our lives.
5. True Christian growth is built upon the fundamentals of the faith, not what some trendy church growth guru tells us. So we should focus on:
   1. Prayer - Korean Christians have had profound prayer lives. The 1907 revival in Pyongyang was largely due to prayer meetings. Many churches in Korea today put a robust emphasis on prayer. Koreans Christians are famous for attending their church’s 5 AM prayer meeting before heading to work each day.
   2. The Bible - Most Korean Protestants are theologically conservative. They have a high view of Scripture and believe in the inerrancy of the Bible. As a result, Protestant liberalism has never really gained a foothold in Korea.[[7]](#footnote-6)
   3. Evangelism - The church grew largely because of the evangelistic zeal of Korean Christians sharing the Gospel with their neighbors. We should do the same.
6. Integrity and holiness are critical to Christian witness.
   1. Many scandals have rocked megachurches in Korea. As a result, many have left Christianity altogether or many have even begun to join the Catholic Church. So while the percentage of Protestant Christians is stagnant, the Catholic Church in Korea has actually begun to grow.

Now, I want to end our time today by talking a little more about North Korea. As you might have noticed, I left out any mention of North Korea as we began to discuss the modern era. Once the Soviets came to North Korea, Pyongyang, once the center of Christianity in the peninsula, became center stage for a showdown between Christian and Communist forces. As you all know, the communist forces ended up winning.

Under Kim Il Sung’s dictatorship, which started in 1948, all churches were immediately closed and the Bible was banned. For reasons that we probably will never understand until we get to heaven, the Lord, nearly overnight, allowed the lamp of the church in North Korea to be put out. Half a century later, not much has changed. North Korea remains one of the most brutal governments and worst perpetrators of human rights violations we have ever seen.

Any North Korean caught following Jesus is at immediate risk of imprisonment, brutal torture, and death. The government, led by Kim Jong-un, views Christians as the most dangerous political class of people and so the persecution is violent and intense. North Koreans often feel compelled to hide their faith even from their own children. An estimated 50,000 - 70,000 Christians (potentially a quarter of all Christians in North Korea) are imprisoned in concentration camps where the conditions are so terrible that they are only really comparable to those of the Holocaust.

To make matters worse, often when a person is imprisoned for following Christ, their whole family suffers the same fate. Believers who are caught for “crimes” like possessing a Bible are on the lowest rung of society and are last to receive whatever meager food rations are available. North Korea is extremely dangerous for followers of Jesus and as long as the current regime remains in power, this seems unlikely to change. We should pray for the downfall of this government in North Korea.

But, there is still hope! God has somehow, even through the most severe persecution, preserved a remnant of believers in North Korea. Let me share with you the story of one North Korean believer named Bae:

*Bae and her husband were sentenced to a lifetime of back-breaking labor after North Korean authorities discovered they owned a Bible. Every morning in the village she’s forced to live in, Bae spends the day working in the fields. She has to meet her work quota of crops. Like everyone else in her village, Bae is close to starving – she, along with everyone else, is given just enough food to survive. But at night, in the privacy of her home, Bae gathers with a handful of other Christians and they spend time together in worship and prayer. Bae is a secret house church leader and this is her real work.*

*Bae once managed to escape to China – a dangerous and risky journey – but once there, she found a safe house run by Christian partners. She sang worship songs and prayed loudly for the first time in her life. She read the Bible openly with fellow believers and had fellowship in a way that is impossible to have in North Korea today.*

*You would think someone like Bae would praise God for her lucky escape and then never look back, but amazingly, when she was offered the chance to stay in the safe house and be relocated, she refused. Instead, Bae returned home with food and medicine and a precious Bible where she plans on sharing all these with her underground group of believers. These gifts will sustain the faith of these North Korean Christians for years to come.*

Friends, we must cling onto the promise that God’s Word will never come back empty handed. Let’s pray.

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1. Japan, in comparison, has 120 million people, the U.S. 330 million and China and India each have a population somewhere around 1.4 billion. [↑](#footnote-ref-0)
2. *The Korean Pentecost* by William N. Blair & Bruce F. Hunt, pg. 84 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
3. *Christianity in Korea* by Robert E. Buswell & Timothy S. Lee, pg. 20. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
4. *The Korean Missionary Movement* by Steve Sang-Cheol Moon, p. 197. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
5. [Why Christianity Quit Growing in Korea](https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/christianity-quit-growing-korea/) [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
6. [Korea: Why So Many Megachurches?](https://outreachmagazine.com/features/11955-why-so-many-megachurches-in-korea.html) [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
7. Hard to get exact % and stats from an English source, but multiple sources seem to affirm this assertion. Two sources here: [The Biblicism of the Korean Protestant churches: Its origin and early development](https://hts.org.za/index.php/hts/article/view/3441/8426) and *The Korean Missionary Movement* p. 197-198. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)