

Reformed Worldview and Korean Society

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1. Introduction

By the grace of God, Korean churches experienced enormous revival and growth over the last 100 years. In addition, it is unique that Reformed and Presbyterian churches have been the main stream of Korean churches. At present, Korean churches have sent more missionaries throughout the world, than any other country except the U.S.A., and the biggest Presbyterian churches in the world are in Seoul. Therefore, from the perspective of church history, the Korean church will be remembered as one of the most successful and exemplary cases.

At the same time, Korean churches have made a decisive contribution to the development of modern Korean society. Even though they were not so many, Korean Christians were involved very actively in the independence movement during the period of Japanese occupation. They have produced leaders by establishing many schools. Public health was also promoted through many hospitals. Social welfare services, such as orphanages, have been provided through Christian ministries. Furthermore, Korean society in general has benefitted from the influence of the Korean Church in reducing smoking, drinking, gambling, social discrimination, gender inequality, and in promoting a thrifty life style, honesty, diligence, and in the idea of vocation as a calling from God. All these elements became the foundation of modern Korea in the 20th century. The foundation of this cultural transformation is a Reformed Christian worldview.

After 100 years, however, Korean churches are now facing a new transition point. Due to the powerful challenge of secularization, they are no longer increasing in numbers but rather are decreasing. Furthermore, the credibility of Korean church is falling dramatically due to various scandals. Even though the numbers of Christians are more than 20% of the whole population, not many of them are functioning as salt and light in the society. The Reformed worldview has been emphasized by Korean Presbyterian churches, but it has not been consistently applied to each sphere of Korean society such as science, politics and economics. This situation requires us to reflect more critically the past of Korean church history and to provide a new alternative for the future.

Nevertheless, we are witnessing at the same time that God is still working in a very dynamic way in China and many other parts of the world. We see also that many Korean diaspora Christians are playing a very important role in this global era. For instance, we have seen that a Korean-American second generation, Dr. Michael Oh, has become the new Executive Director/Chief Executive Officer of Lausanne Committee for World Evangelization, succeeding Dr. Doug Birdsall, last March 1, 2013.

With this situation in mind, this article first deals with first, how a Reformed worldview has transformed Korean society for the last 100 years. After that we will discuss what kind of new paradigm it should provide for the coming century in order to make a significant contribution not only to Korean society but also to global society.

2. Reformed Worldview and Korean Society

2.1. The Contents of Reformed Worldview

In general, it was Abraham Kuyper, a Dutch theologian and politician, who has developed Reformed worldview systematically. He emphasized that the sovereignty of Christ should be manifested in every sphere of our lives. In order to teach this worldview more systematically, he even founded Free University (Vrije Universiteit) in Amsterdam in 1880. He concluded his opening address by saying, „there is not a square inch in the whole domain of our human existence over which Christ, who is sovereign over all, does not cry: ‘Mine!’” (geen duimbreed is er op heel ‘t erf van ons menselijk leven, waarvan Christus, die aller Souverein is, niet roept: „Mijn!“). (Kuyper: 1880, 35) The basic contents of this Reformed worldview or Neocalvinism can be summed up as follows (Kuyper: 1983):

- 2.1.1. Jesus Christ, to whom all authority in heaven and on earth is given, is the Lord of all and redeems every aspect of our lives. Therefore, we have to admit the headship of Christ and should not accept the dualistic worldview which separates the sacred and the secular sphere of our lives.
- 2.1.2. Creation means that the triune God has made this world beautifully and orderly. After making man in His image, God has given the so called ‘Cultural Mandate’ to develop and at the same time take care of His creation. This mandate is given for a historical development and cultural unfolding.
- 2.1.3. Due to the fall of Adam and Eve, sin has affected the whole cosmos and the present world is a distorted and broken one. But here *Structure* and *direction* should be distinguished. Structure means created laws and norms for creation whereas direction denotes relative deviation or conformity to norms. The former remains untouched by the fall because of God’s common grace. But the latter depends upon the central orientation of the human heart toward or away from God.
- 2.1.4. But God has sent Jesus Christ, His only Son, to redeem the whole universe. After Jesus has accomplished his redemptive work, the Holy Spirit has come to apply this redemption into each Christian individually and every Christian community collectively until the consummation. In addition, the redemptive work of Jesus extends over all of life.
- 2.1.5. Each sphere of life (for example, family, church, state, company, etc) has its own distinct responsibilities and authority as designed by God and no one area of life is sovereign over another. This is called *Sphere sovereignty* (*Soevereiniteit in eigen kring*). Therefore, neither church nor the state should seek totalitarian control over other spheres outside their limited competence.
- 2.1.6. There is a struggle in history and within every person – between the kingdom of light and the kingdom of darkness; between submission to and rebellion against God; between the age to come (already inaugurated in Christ) and this present evil age (of sin). This confrontation is called *the antithesis*.
- 2.1.7. Therefore, theoretical thought can never be religiously neutral. All thinking and practice is shaped by world views and religious ground motives. (Dooyeweerd: 1954) All the areas of Christian life should be guided by this biblical worldview.

2.2. The disclosure of modern Korean society

The history of Korea can be called an experiment of various worldviews because shamanism, Buddhism and Confucianism have played a major role in each successive period. (Choi: 2006, 256-337) From the ancient Chosun period (2333 B.C.-108 B.C.) and the Three Kingdoms period: Koguryo (37 B.C.-668 A.D.), Paekche (18 B.C.-660 A.D.), and Shilla (57 B.C.-935 A.D.) to the Unified Shilla Kingdom period (668-935), shamanism was the major worldview. When it could not lead the country with its weak points, a Buddhistic worldview replaced it and became dominant in the Koryo Kingdom period (935-1392). When Buddhism became corrupt at the end of the Koryo period, Neo-Confucianism was introduced and became the major worldview of the Chosun Kingdom (Yi dynasty) period (1392-1910). But at the end of the 19th century, Neo-Confucianism revealed its limit and weak points so it could not lead the Korean society any more but submitted to the imperial control of Japan.

The Christian Message was introduced in this situation as a new alternative. The experiment with the previous 3 worldviews failed, opening a spiritual and mental vacuum among the Korean people. But now the biblical worldview looked like a new light of life to Korean society. Therefore, most leaders accepted this worldview for 'opening up' of Korea's compass to show the direction for the future. Some major elements are as follows: (Choi: 2006, 320-328)

- 2.2.1. As the origin of all, God revealed Himself in Christ as the personal God of Scripture who has overcome superstitious and polytheistic shamanism, syncretic Buddhism and Confucian belief in a sort of sky deity. The Christian worldview of the Creator of heaven and earth and thus the ultimate Origin of reality reformed all the former ideas of origin.
- 2.2.2. The Reformed view of man as the image of God transformed the traditional viewpoints as well. This view of man, as the cultural agent for the service of God and his neighbor, and as a responsible person *Coram Deo* made an enormous impact on the Korean society. This perspective radically confronted and changed the traditional shamanistic attitude of fatalistic determinism. By proclaiming the dignity of labor and reminding people of the equality of all occupations, the view revolutionarily changed the Confucian culture which had discriminated lower classes. Every person, it was said, can contribute to the development of the community by devoting themselves to their occupations.
- 2.2.3. The extension of women's rights was another innovative idea advocated by the Korean church. At that time, women were not treated equally and men felt no embarrassment in public acknowledging their concubines. Their wives were helpless in the face of their husbands' indiscretions because remarriage by women was forbidden. The Christian worldview, however, attempted to restore the rights of women by stressing sexual equality and the need for women's education, arguing that educated mothers were better equipped to raise children and that the development of these human resources would eventually contribute to the general

development of the country. Therefore a school for young girls was founded to train them to be superior wives and mothers, and to be workers for the Christian mission. Even though the traditional rigid class system was abolished by government reforms in 1894 (*Kabo kyongjang*), true class levelling began within the church where all humans were proclaimed to be equal before God. This concept played a significant role to develop democracy in Korea society later.

- 2.2.4. Having seen the traditional Qing China's defeat by a modernized Japan and having seen many powerful weapons and new technologies of the West, lots of Koreans were determined to abandon conventional thought and traditional culture in favor of modernization. Many non-Christians turned to Christianity as the means of modernization and disclosure (*gaehwa*) of Korean society. Through education, the missionaries brought knowledge of Western science and technology and introduced modern educational curricula. Early Korean Protestants regarded disclosure, education and religion as one and the same and believed that Christianity could provide the momentum for socio-cultural reform. Many schools were established by the Presbyterian churches. Especially in the first decade of the 20th century, it could be said that only the church had a complete educational system from the primary to the college level in the country. The old Confucian system of local academies had faded away, and the new Japanese government had not yet developed its own education program. Korean Christian leaders took the initiative in establishing schools that first linked together Korean nationalism and the Christian religion. Those Christian elites played an enormously important role not merely as church leaders but also as national leaders in the modern history of Korea.
- 2.2.5. The work of medical care and education undoubtedly caused many Koreans to look favorably on the Christian faith. Since the first modern hospital was opened by an American missionary under a royal grant in 1885, many hospitals have been established by other missionaries. These medical institutions functioned both as a means to improve the general health care of the country and as an important evangelistic tool. The missionaries encouraged Korean Christians to learn modern science and technology as well as to believe in the gospel. So there was little tension between faith and medical science. Also women were trained to be physicians. In addition, alcohol, tobacco and opium were banned in an attempt to improve people's health. Since then, this has become a sort of unwritten law in the Korean church.
- 2.2.6. The thrifty lifestyle of Korean Christians helped the Korean economy overcome its bondage to Japan. Remarkable too was that the miraculous growth of Korean economy between 1960s and 1990s closely paralleled the dramatic growth of Korean church in the same period. The spirit of stewardship and Reformed worldview might have influenced the development of Korean capitalistic industry as Max Weber has argued. (Weber: 1934)
- 2.2.7. The Christian worldview transformed Korean's traditional view of reality. Rejecting polytheistic shamanism, the Korean Church began to emphasize the

importance of a rational way of thinking, and of modern science and technology. Criticizing the negative view of reality in Buddhism, Reformed thinkers tried to be realistic, confronting the difficult situation at that time and attempting to overcome that situation rather than passively accepting it as their own fate. Against the traditional Confucian social class system, Korean Christians brought modern social values of freedom, equality, justice, peace and human rights to Korea and so served as a liberating force for those shackled under Confucian thought. It was also associated with movements for national independence and socio-political democracy, and the freedom of the press. In the 1960s and 70s, Korean liberal Christians played a significant role in resisting the oppression of human rights, the non-democratic military dictatorship and an authoritarian bureaucracy. They also took part in social reform movements to improve wages and the working conditions among poor urban workers. All of these movements were accelerated by the Christian view of history, namely, the sovereignty of God in history, the eschatological victory of the Kingdom of God, and the linear, rather than circular or retrospective, conception of time.

- 2.2.8. The publication of the Bible in the Korean alphabet, *Hangul*, initiated the widespread use of the vernacular script. Many other Christian books were written in or translated into the Korean language. With the spread of the Korean Bible and hymn books the Korean script was also spread. These activities reduced illiteracy, and played an important role in breaking down the Chinese cultural hold of the Confucian upper class. The truth found in the Bible was easily available to the common people, which sharply contrasts with Korean Buddhism and Confucianism because their scriptures written in Chinese were almost inaccessible to the general public.
- 2.2.9. The prestige of this Christian worldview was reinforced by the presence of many Christians among the nationalists. In spite of the fact that there were also Christians who collaborated with the Japanese in the latter part of the colonial period, Korean Christianity never became associated as such with imperialism. Many Koreans, humiliated and frustrated by Japanese aggression, accepted Protestantism more readily because they associated it with deliverance from Japanese invasion. They sought a solution to the nation's dilemma in the Korean churches, also known for their energy and organizational capacity. After liberation and economic growth, Korean churches began to help other underdeveloped countries by sending missionaries and by supporting North Korean refugees throughout the world.

In conclusion, the Christian Reformed worldview has been a very powerful driving force in the disclosure of modern Korean Society, making a crucial contribution in overcoming the demerits of all the traditional religions and worldviews in terms of their ideas and cultural structures and in unfolding modern Korean culture by directing it with its Biblical perspective. This does not mean, however, that it has always been right in every aspect. Korean Christian churches have made some serious mistakes and still have many shortcomings that need to be corrected. Due to these problems, Korean churches are now

facing their greatest challenge that requires a serious and critical reflection. These problems will be dealt with in the following section from the Reformed perspective.

2.3. Modern Korean society and Reformed worldview

In the 21st century the Korean church faces a decrease in terms of membership and influence. Furthermore, Korean Christians have often become the object of criticism rather than respect. The reasons might be summed up as follows:

- 2.3.1. Materialism. As most churches pursue growth, materialistic and shamanistic worldviews have crept into the minds of Korean Christians. Prosperity theology was introduced to justify material success as a blessing from God irregardless of the way to achieve the goal. Furthermore, due to a new church building project, the financial burden became heavier to each member and so a special offering was often imposed. As a result some protestant Christians were disappointed by this and converted to Catholicism.
- 2.3.2. Division. Korean churches have experienced too many divisions due to the political power struggle and trivial debates within local churches, synods and the general assembly. Even in one Presbyterian denomination, there are numerous sub-divisions. Some of them have even the same name. Due to this problem, the Korean church has lost credibility within Korean society.
- 2.3.3. Lack of morality. For many Christians, both leaders and lay people, their lives are not integrated with their confession of faith. Many leaders have committed sexual scandals, plagiarism, financial conflicts of interest, and shadowy church administration have not shown the authentic sign of repentance and forthright leadership. Furthermore, young people oppose Confucian authoritarianism followed by many church leaders. In many cases, the church calendar was not fully taken into consideration and the sermon texts tend to be only some parts of the Bible and the Lord's Supper was not performed as often as it should be.
- 2.3.4. The secularization of Christian universities. Most Christian universities in Korea have lost their Christian identity due to their commercial interests. Gradually they have compromised to the secular value by recruiting non-Christian professors. Therefore, they cannot make any significant impact within Korean society.
- 2.3.5. The challenge of Islam. The power of Islam is expanding worldwide, now reaching to Korea. However, Korean churches are not prepared for this challenge.
- 2.3.6. Postmodern pluralism and lack of multicultural ministry. Postmodern relativism is gaining more support so that homosexuality and transgender issues are regarded as natural. Any kind of discrimination is criticized as dogmatic and intolerant. Korean churches have become, therefore, more defensive than before.
At the same time, Korean churches have not developed an effective multi-cultural ministry to serve various kinds of increasingly multi-cultural families in Korean society but still maintain traditional ministries for mainly ethnic Koreans.

- 2.3.7. Lack of mature Christian culture. Even though there are so many Christians, about 20% of the whole population, Korean churches have failed to develop a more mature Christian culture. Many Korean Christians work as various professionals but they cannot integrate their workplace with the Christian faith. Reformed worldview is very active as a movement in Korean society but it does not bring a true social transformation.

Consequently, Korean churches with Reformed worldview are at a tipping point and can go forward to further development or go backward and lose influence in Korean and global society.

2.4. A new paradigm for the future

Then what kind of a new paradigm should we propose for the next 100 years? I would like to suggest the following based upon our analysis at the previous section.

- 2.4.1. Reformed worldview should criticize the danger of materialism in the Korean church. Pointing out the shamanistic way of thinking and life-style, we have to emphasize that we cannot worship God and mammon at the same time. Instead, the Reformed worldview can promote the spirit of Jubilee and the communal life model of the ancient Christian community described in the book of Acts 2.

Bob Goudzwaard, a famous Dutch professor of economics, argues that we should not seek merely economic growth any more but rather emphasize the life-style of stewardship and so pursue the 'economy of care'. (Goudzwaard: 2007, 205) It means that instead of merely accumulating wealth, we should practice sharing the extra we have.

Peter Hahne, a popular German Christian journalist, wrote his best-seller *Schluss mit lustig!: Das Ende der Spaßgesellschaft* (Stop extra desire: The end of the fun society) in which he emphasize that we should control our desires and live a sober and thrifty life. (Hahne: 2009) Appreciating the fruit of our labor as God's blessing, we should fear the LORD (Ps. 128) and take care of our neighbors in need with Christian love.

In relation to this, we can think of using the church building with a new paradigm, for instance a multiple complex space not only for worshipping God but also serving the local community.

Contemporary society needs the social involvement of evangelical churches. The Cape Town Commitment, the official document of the 3rd Lausanne Congress on world evangelization also admits this and emphasizes that the whole church should take the whole gospel to the whole world which has various problems. In this sense, John Stott suggests in his book, *Issues Facing Christian Today*, that Christian churches should emphasize the protestant work ethic (diligence, honesty, stewardship, frugality) in order to resolve the problem of unemployment and that each local church can do a lot of community activities such as a child-care program, kindergarten, elderly and, coffee shop outreach, work training etc. One can remodel the traditional church building in order to do this kind of program.

Even he suggests that one can change the name church into 'Christian Center'. (Stott: 1990, 177-181)

New wine should be poured into new wineskins. (Mt. 9:17, Mk. 2:22, Lk. 5:37-38)
The Korean church should go beyond secular materialism and the prosperity gospel and take the full mission of evangelism and social responsibility in balance. In order to do that the Reformed worldview should be able to provide a new paradigm in this postmodern age without losing the essential elements of Biblical truth.

- 2.4.2. In contrast to the Catholic, Korean Presbyterian churches have been divided a lot. This problem should be seriously dealt with. In order to overcome this problem, Korean churches should attempt to build Christian unity if they share the same reformed worldview not only in domestic but also in international dimension. Then Korean society will admit the authority of the Korean church and try to listen to her voice. (Choi: 2006)
- 2.4.3. The ethical corruption of Korean church leaders prove that the Reformed worldview has not been embodied in daily life. We need to thoroughly repent and practice discipleship at individual, local church, synod and general assembly levels. Korean Christian leaders should first be role-models of holy, honest and transparent lives. When something wrong has been found out, they should be ready to take full responsibility. Only then can the Korean church regain respect from Korean society.

One example might be removing all the chairs at the front of the church building where altar and pulpit stand. Most Korean pastors sit behind the pulpit or next to the altar for the whole service. But in the German Protestant churches, there is no chair for the preacher at the altar area. He sits just in front row together with other members of the church. He goes forward only when he preaches. But in Korean churches, the chairs for pastor or elder look like thrones where our God should sit. It might imply that they represent God and proclaim His message but it might give a wrong impression to the modern congregation that they look too authoritarian.

In addition, the Biblical texts for the sermon are quite limited in the Korean church. The whole Bible should be preached in 3 years for instance so that the congregation might hear the Word of God in balance. At the same time, Korean churches have lost the blessing of the Lord's Supper because they have emphasized the preaching ministry too much. It should not be misunderstood as a Catholic mass and so be practiced as often as possible.

- 2.4.4. In order to prevent the secularization of Christian university, Christian professors should try to restore the Reformed worldview and to integrate their scientific research with Christian faith. Furthermore, their faith and scholarship should be integrated with their sincere life-style as well. In this way, they can show an example to the students and train the leaders of the next generation. In addition, not only universities but also the whole education program from kindergarten through elementary school to middle & high school should be integrated with the education in church and family with a Reformed worldview. In this way, Korean churches should demonstrate that they do not need any private education which costs too much time and money in Korean society. Through this kind of

educational reformation, Korean churches should be the catalyst for the transformation of Korean society and culture in the coming 100 years.

2.4.5. Against the challenge of Islam to the Korean society, Korean churches should develop total measures and strategies. For instance, they can develop Sunday school textbooks that teach what Islam is, and identify the problems with its worldview. Furthermore, various seminars or training programs can be developed to teach pastors and lay people about the Islamic worldview and its dangers together with an effective way to confront Muslims with a gospel message and a loving attitude.

2.4.6. Pluralism is another great challenge to Korean society these days. Postmodern relativism seems to be the main spirit of the time (*Zeitgeist*) and so ignores the conservative attitude of Korean churches. Against this trend, a Reformed worldview has to show clear biblical standards and criteria. Such a worldview should help Korean churches give a strong voice to sensitive issues like homosexuality, etc. At the same time, it should also warn Korean Christians not to be too aggressive toward other worldviews or religions so that they might show respect and decency.

On the other hand, however, a Reformed worldview strongly affirms a multi-cultural ministry and society as the expression of God's abundant creation. Korean society has been transformed from basically one ethnicity to a diverse, multi-cultural one. But Korean churches are still focusing on Korean ethnic people as the main focus. Although some churches have English/Chinese/Japanese services for each ethnic group, they rarely have an integrating ministry. The Bible clearly says that there is no favoritism in God. (Acts 10:34-35, Col. 3:25) Abraham was chosen to be a blessing to all nations. Therefore the Israelites should love Gentiles and foreigners. (Ex. 22:21, 23:9) The book of Ruth clearly shows that the Gentile people could participate in the blessings of God. In addition, almost all kinds of congregations in the New Testament formed a multi-ethnic unity where Jewish Christians gathered together with the Gentile believers. (Gal. 3:28)

In order to be a global church and to make disciples of all nations, Korean churches need to transform their worship services with simultaneous translation systems and power point presentations in Korean and English so that all kinds of people can join without any problem. In this way, the Korean church should be a house of prayer for all nations.' (Mk. 11:27) Non-Koreans who have become Korean citizens should be able to be church leaders in Korean churches. Then Korean churches will be the universal church in the true sense of the word and be a channel of blessing for all nations. (Choi: 2013, 160-164)

2.4.7. A Reformed worldview stresses that all of our lives should be redeemed. All kinds of professional Christians need to realize that they are called to serve their own areas for the kingdom of God. Furthermore, they need to gather together in order to share how they can realize and achieve the will of God in their spheres to make contributions not only in Korean society but also in the global community. In order to do that they need to pray and discuss among themselves through various

gatherings. In this way, Korean Christians should not fall into the error of dualism but rather reveal the sovereignty of Christ in every domain of their lives to redeem it. Then, Korean society will be transformed by this kind of authentic and integrative effort of Korean churches based upon a Reformed worldview.

Of course, there might be more suggestions. We should be open for all the other possible options and be ready to reform ourselves first because the church of Christ is reformed but should be always reformed (*Ecclesia Reformata et Semper Reformanda*).

3. Conclusion

Protestantism has been a powerful driving force in the disclosure of modern Korea, making a crucial contribution in overcoming the limitations of all the traditional religions in terms of their ideas and cultural structures and in opening up modern Korean culture by directing it with its Biblical worldview. It does not mean, however, that it has always been correct in every aspect. Korean churches still have many shortcomings that need to be overcome. For instance, some shamanistic elements have crept into Korean Christianity so deeply that worldly success is still emphasized as the sign of God's blessing. In addition, some Confucian aspects such as authoritarianism have made another serious impact on Korean Churches. Furthermore, materialism has been a serious threat to the Korean church, making it more secular and corrupt. These problems should be continuously criticized as non-Christian elements and as obstacles to the proper unfolding of Christian culture in Korea. They must be overcome by emphasizing the Reformed worldview, the biblical ethics of humble service and the Christian spirit of responsible stewardship. Then Korean Christianity can keep transforming Korean society and give a new vision and light as the hope for the future.

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