

Zakary Nilsen

THEO 251

Professor Dr. Schlabach

May 16, 2020

Issues Facing the Korean Church

The Korean Church has been around since as early as 1593, and ever since then has grown rapidly in an area where Eastern ideologies and religions such as Confucianism, Buddhism, Taoism, etc. tend to be more dominant. The Korean Church has faced many issues since its founding in Korea itself, as it was deemed a threat to Confucian values, and therefore any person who was Christian was executed. Christians in Korea were persecuted up until the Japanese Occupation of Korea in 1905. This began an independence movement that went hand and hand with Christianity, as many Christians themselves identified with the movement. This blending of faith with Korean nationalism caught the eyes of many Koreans and is why Christianity started to grow and catch on with more and more people. Once the Japanese occupation of Korea ended in 1945, the U.S. helped further develop Christianity, which led to a massive boom in people joining the Church and is now why Christianity is the dominant religion. (New World 2017). Issues the Korean Church face now are of a different scale now, as it is no longer the minority religion of an oppressed faith, but the dominant majority religion. Though this idea is now coming into conflict as more and more people abstain from Christianity as more and more problems arise in society.

One of the biggest issues facing the Korean Church right now is that younger generations are leaving Christianity behind. While Christianity is the largest religion in South Korea with 29% of the population, 46% of the population have no religious affiliation whatsoever

(PewResearchCenter 2014). Most people in South Korea believe religion is a waste of time, and as someone put it, “God is invisible... There are real things that I want to do with my life, and I don’t have time to sit and talk to a man in the sky” (groundtruth). Korean people now, especially the younger generations are in a very competitive demanding market right now, with high education demands and a society that is constantly pushing forward to the future. Many believe that “Christianity, with its emphasis on ritual and tradition, is just too old” (groundtruth). Most people just say there is no time to spend going to Church anymore, since there are so many other things that take up their time to begin with. This movement is spreading throughout Korea, as more and more youth who grew up in Christian families, separate from the Church as soon as they hit adulthood. This is the biggest issue that the Korean church is facing right now, as more and more of younger Korean generations believe there is no point to put faith in some all-powerful being that presides over them. This trend is not stopping and is actually increasing at an ever so alarming rate, as before 1945 Korean Christians totaled “2% of total population, but as the Japanese occupation ended Korean Christianity rose to 25.1% of the total population, and eventually leading to the 2016 where 39% of the population was Christian” (New World 2017). This is now turning around though, as stated above only 29% are Christian and 46% have no religious affiliation. This belief that Christianity is old and needs to go and make way for the new is the main reason why the Korean Church is being abandoned.

Another reason why so Christianity is faltering is that it is falling behind an everchanging world in not just Korea, but in social aspects. According to young Koreans, “The churches’ views on these issues can make it difficult for young people to feel at home. My best friend is gay, and the pastor at my parents’ church always says that being gay is a sin” (groundtruth). This is one of the reasons why, not only in Korea, that people are leaving Christianity behind, is the

inability for many in the Christian community to accept homosexual relationships, as they deem it as a 'sin'. Though while this does not mean all Christians are against this, there are those in the community who are, and this is the challenge for the Church as it evolves with the everchanging world around it. So many people that are Christian homosexuals end up giving up calling themselves Christian and stop going to church due to the constant harassment they face from those who are unaccepting of who they are. Lee Min says that his friend "was so uncomfortable going to church that he stopped calling himself a Christian" and that when he decided to talk to his parents about this that they "got mad at [him] because they said that [he] was questioning God and that's a sin" (groundtruth). While there are those who take the Christian values to heart and respect everyone regardless of their differences, as demonstrated there are those who cannot accept change, and this is why many youths in Korea and the world are stepping away from Christianity.

Other reasons why the Church is becoming unfavorable with younger generations is a social issue that has been brought to light in more modern society, hierarchy. The reason this is a problem does not necessarily stem from Christianity completely, as in this case it is their rigid Confucian values about how young should relate to elders, women to men, lay people to pastors, etc. (groundtruth). It is the societal hierarchy that everyone must relate to that have been set in tradition for generations, that affect how people are feeling about the Church. One Korean youth said "I don't like hierarchy. "There's hierarchy in companies, there's hierarchy in military; I don't want more hierarchy in my church" (groundtruth). Most young Koreans are now moving away from the rigid set Confucian rules and believe that it is not right for some people to be on top of others based on their gender, age or profession, and this is why many young Koreans do not like this, as this is used to lecture the youth. Due to many younger Koreans now leaving the

country to study abroad they realized that this hierarchy does not exist in other countries and this is why they decided to start a new church called the Jubilee Church. The Jubilee church is meant to operate without the hierarchy of Korean churches, one of the people who founded this says that during their bible studies that, “Bible study is a conversation among equals, not a lecture by the elder... I can talk to the pastors at Jubilee... that would never happen in a Korean church” (groundtruth). This idea is similar to an American church, and this might be the solution to the issue that the current Korean church is facing, is to rid of this hierarchy and to have everyone on equal ground, as this is one principal of Christianity itself. To be accepting of others, regardless of differences, and to actually embrace those differences, as Christianity itself is universal, and faith cannot be hindered.

More young people in Korea are turned away because of corruption in the Korean Church as well, as lately due to scandals, Christianity in Korea is losing lots of its credibility. “In 2014, Yoido Gospel Church, the world’s largest megachurch, came under fire when their pastor, Yonggi Cho was convicted of embezzling \$12 million in church funds” (groundtruth). This has led to a complete distrust in the Church and those who run it, leading to many people leaving Christianity behind and it slowly falling out of favor with the public. Most people in Korea now only believe the purposes of these churches are for the pastors to obtain cash and get rich. This has led to people losing faith in God and thinking that everything about the Church is a lie to obtain cash. “My mom attends a megachurch. When a church is that big, it’s really difficult for me to believe that they’re not just doing it to get rich” (groundtruth). This distrust between the Church and the people is making many people who are skeptical about the Church’s intentions, and this makes the Korean people very untrusting, and leading many to abandon their faith.

Many of these issues deal with the idea it is some people of the Church that are unwilling to change, or those who are hypocritical to Christian values that are causing these problems within the Korean church. The Church itself is a place where all people should be accepted, as it is a place for anyone to demonstrate their faith towards God. The reason why Christianity is falling out of favor is due to the Korean church not being able to evolve with the times, as Christianity itself is a constantly evolving religion and that's how it has become such a global and universal religion. If there are those in the Korean church who cannot realize they will be left behind as the Church moves on without them, it is inevitable that change will happen, that is one true constant of life. These social issues that arise from the Church will only help make the Church stronger in the end, as Christianity itself is ultimately meant to bring people together, and that is the beauty of the Church and why it has persevered for so long. The whole idea of Christianity is to be accepting of everyone, and these values will hold true no matter what happens, Christianity will always be there for everyone, the oppressed, the weak and even the strong, for Christianity opens its arms wide for all.

Works Cited

- “Christianity in Korea.” Accessed February 27, 2020. *Christianity in Korea - New World Encyclopedia*, 2017, www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Christianity_in_Korea.
- Connor, Phillip. “6 Facts about Christianity in South Korea.” *Pew Research Center*. Pew Research Center, August 12, 2014. Last modified August 12, 2014. Accessed May 15, 2020. <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2014/08/12/6-facts-about-christianity-in-south-korea/>.
- Vazquez, Ashley. “Korean Churches Lose Young Congregants, Who View Religion as Irrelevant.” *The GroundTruth Project*. Last modified July 25, 2019. Accessed May 15, 2020. <https://thegroundtruthproject.org/korean-churches-lose-young-congregants-view-religion-irrelevant/>.