CHRISTIAN IDENTITY IN THE KOREAN CONTEXT

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BY WAY OF INTRODUCTION

In this paper I want to briefly introduce the Korean church—her past, present, and future—with special reference to her efforts to maintain Christian identity in this troubled world. It was, in a sense, somewhat easy to maintain Christian identity when the Korean church was really (in every sense of the word) the small flock of Jesus Christ, although it was physically hard to do so. It becomes, however, difficult to hold onto Christian identity when there are so many different kinds of Christians in secular society. Today even the term ‘Christian identity’ becomes a matter of debate.1 What do I mean by this? In order to answer this question, let us go back more than 120 years ago. I hope your voyage through time with me will not be boring, but an interesting and heuristic experience that can give us some clues to solve the problem of ‘Christian identity in this global and pluralistic world.’

It was slightly more than 120 years ago that the first gospel missionaries came to Korea. Henry G. Appenzeller, the first Methodist missionary to Korea, and Horace G. Underwood, the first Presbyterian missionary to Korea, simultaneously stepped on Korean soil at Jaemulpo (In-cheon port) on Easter Sunday, 1885. Horace N. Allen, a medical missionary who belonged to the Northern Presbyterian Church of USA, had arrived in Korea on September 20, 1884.2 There were several

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2 In 1866 Rev. Robert Jermain Thomas, a Welshman, came to Korea as a guide of the American commercial ship named the General Sherman. It is said that he gave a Chinese Bible to Korean soldiers before he was killed for coming to Korea without
Korean Christians, however, before these missionaries came to Korea. These were people who read and were deeply interested in the scriptures, which had been translated into the Korean language. There were two versions of the Korean Bible that were translated into Korean even before missionaries came to Korea.

One version of the Bible was translated by the Rev. John Ross, a Scottish missionary, who was stationed at Manchuria, China. Because he published a *Corean Primer* in 1877, we can see what his relationship with Koreans had been before that time. The Rev. Ross met Mr. Ung-chan Lee, a young, Korean man in 1874. The Koreans who helped the Rev. Ross with his Korean and Bible translation were Mr. Ung-chan Lee, Mr. Jin-kee Kim, Mr. Hong-joon Paik, and Mr. San-yoon Suh. It is said that four Koreans, including Mr. Ung-chan Lee and Mr. Hong-joon Paik, had already been baptized on 1879 by Rev. John MacIntyre. Mr. Chung-song Kim, a printer, was baptized in May 1882 as the fifth baptized Korean—after he had printed the Korean translation of the Gospel of Luke. 3,000 copies of the Gospel of Luke, translated by the Rev. John Ross, were printed on March 1882, and the Gospel of John was printed on May 1882 at Sim-yang, China. The afore-mentioned Mr. Chung-song Kim distributed copies of the gospels to the Koreans. It is said that three learned men came to Sim-yang to ask the Rev. John Ross serious questions about Christianity after reading the gospels distributed by Mr. Chung-song Kim. The Rev. John Ross came to a Korean village near Zip-ahn to baptize 75 people during the winter of 1884 after a journey of 600 miles under hard temperatures of up to 40 degrees below zero centigrade. It is certain that there were 20 candidates to be baptized in So-rae near Seoul by March 1885, one permission from the authorities. But there was no direct contact between him and Koreans.

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6 The Institute of Korean Church History Studies, *A History of Korean Church*, vol. 1, 150.