The Great Revival in Korea, 1903-1907: between Evangelical Aims and the Pursuit of Salvation in the National Crisis

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I. Introduction

The 1907 Great Revival has been regarded as the Pentecost of the Korean Church. According to this narrative, when the Holy Spirit came to the Korean Christians, they were convicted of their sins, repented, and became regenerated. The born-again experience facilitated the nation-wide mass movement for conversion, and the church grew rapidly in number. It is said that the Great Revival gave Korean Protestantism its representative character.

Historians are largely agreed that the Great Revival shaped Korean Protestantism in the mold of revivalist Christianity seeking salvation of individual souls for eternal life in the next world, with a distinct separation of Christian religion from politics. However, there has been some disagreement about the nature and the effects of the Great Revival. Some historians from the missionary perspective emphasize its contribution to the moral and spiritual rebirth and the rapid growth of Korean Protestant churches.¹ The nationalist and intellectual historians criticize the revival for turning Korean Christians’ concerns to religious enthusiasm and spiritual welfare as well as for making Korean Christians acquiesce to Japanese colonialism in the name of separation of church and state.² The revisionist

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historiographies harmonize the evangelical nature of the revival with the broader aspect of the nationalist effect. They argue that the revival inspired the view that national problems could be identified with individual spiritual weakness and implied that personal salvation through repentance and conversion would lead to the restoration of the nation. 3)

Specifically, Kenneth M. Wells defines Protestant nationalism as “self-reconstruction nationalism,” which can be equal to “ethico-spiritual nationalism.” The proponents viewed that national weakness resulted from an absence of “moral fortitude and spiritual integrity” that could be addressed through the Christian faith and Christian civilization, with its ethical, cultural reconstruction as the basis of the nation rather than political activism. Wells argues that cultural nationalism including the Protestant nationalism was the only valid concept and form of the nation for Koreans in the colonial era when political nationalism was prohibited and strongly suppressed. Within self-reconstruction nationalism, moral self-improvement based on Christianity was related to the reconstruction of the nation, and “tension between nationalist ends and transcendental claims for the Kingdom of God” became reconciled. 4) For the Protestant nationalism, personal salvation can be linked with national salvation while “inner, spiritual renewal is essential to outward revival and solves national problems.” 5)

In this regard, the Great Revival should not be seen as either an anti-nationalist movement or as simply an ahistorical religious event. Although it decisively separated Christian religion from political action,


5) Ibid., 40.