

Articles and Sermons :: The Church I Dreamed Of - Kwon Jeong-saeng

The Church I Dreamed Of - Kwon Jeong-saeng - posted by ArthurRosh, on: 2017/12/7 20:42

Many years ago I told a friend I wanted to start a church. It wouldn't have a big steeple with a cross on top; I'd just build a traditional Korean pavilion-style house just large enough to hold fifty or a hundred people. No pulpit, just a wooden floor where we could sit in a circle. We wouldn't have a sign out front advertising "So-and-so's Church" either. We'd call it "The Magpie's House," or name it after a fairy-tale character.

At our church services, we'd just talk about our lives and the Bible. Sometimes a monk might come over from the temple and read from Buddha's teachings, or the schoolmaster might tell about Confucius and Mencius. On special days like Dano, the rice-planting festival in early summer, we'd roast a pig, share home-brewed rice wine, dance, and play games. When hard times came, we would help each other. That's the kind of church I wanted.

This idea filled me with enthusiasm, and I prayed about it. But years passed, and the church was never built.

I've been a baptized Christian for thirty years, serving as a deacon for much of this time, but I've never been to a service that fully satisfied my longing; often the ritual seems empty of real life. Nevertheless, I think I met God when I lived in a little room by the church door and rang the morning bells. I still miss the peace I felt on cold winter mornings when I pulled on the bell rope and looked up at the brilliant stars in the black sky.

Back then, in the 1960s, the early morning prayers at the village church were simple and beautiful. The memory of kneeling to pray on the cold wooden floor by the light of an oil lamp — there was no electricity — seems sacred. The church members were poor. They had all lived through bad times, and their talk was spare and honest. One deaconess had lost her husband in the war and lived with her only daughter. It used to tear my heart to hear her sing her favorite hymn: "I follow God's will amid this world's joys and pains, and when my body fails, give me great faith."

Then she would break down sobbing and everyone would fall silent. After the service was over and everyone went home, the sun shone in the church windows and you could see the frozen marks of tears on the wooden floor.

We were all poor, but the church was full of love. If you would flip through the church account books from those days, you might see when a few hundred won from the church fund were lent out to a parishioner in need.

Back then, the pastor's salary was barely enough to live on, sometimes only a bushel of millet and a few baskets of rice. To repair the derelict church building, he had to go into the mountains and fell trees, and for water he had to dig his own well. As a result, it was easy for him to become close to his parishioners. In the evenings, the young people would gather in the church foyer to weave baskets and read together. They worked until late at night and then roasted sweet potatoes and turnips. Most people had no money to put in the collection plate; their offering was to donate their work and show love. In this way, Christianity simply became a part of people's lives.

It was an isolated mountain village of about fifty families, in which the church had first arrived a hundred years earlier — only a few thatched huts and a tin-roofed church. But it almost felt like heaven on earth. There was no theft, nobody drank or smoked, and nobody yelled or cursed. Unlike elsewhere in Korea, we never suffered the "barley famine," the weeks in spring before the first barley harvest when people used to starve, since each household had enough farmland to support itself with food.

This way of life ended abruptly in the 1970s, when the church succumbed to authoritarianism, materialism, and religious emotionalism. Instead of praying quietly in their hearts, people yelled and babbled like lunatics. No longer was it a matter of duty and vocation to serve as elder or deacon — instead it became a position of status and power. Big-city pastors discriminated against village pastors, and churchgoers discriminated against one another, growing cold and distant in their relationships. People still smiled and greeted each other, but they no longer spoke honestly and sincerely. Their Christianity changed from a faith that depended on God into a religion aimed at attaining power, money, and success — using God as a convenient instrument. If you didn't become rich within three years of accepting Jesus, people thought there was something wrong with your faith.

The big revivalists even distorted the Korean language, saying words like "believe," "accept Jesus," and ""

love with such slurred pronunciation that you could hardly understand them. Was it a gift of the Spirit that made them talk that way, or just boundless arrogance? Even swindlers selling fake medicine don't talk so sloppily. Didn't the apostle Paul say that love is not arrogant or proud? Jesus said that you should pray in secret, that you should comb your hair and not put on a show in front of other people when you fast, that your right hand shouldn't know what your left hand does. He warns against babbling in the marketplace.

But what do many churches do? They go all over the world shouting and yelling and then call it mission; aren't they really dishonoring God? The church is in danger of becoming just another pollutant, spreading trash instead of salt and light. But too many Christians don't pause to think; they carry on without realizing the true state of affairs, just like the proverbial emperor in his new clothes.

You will know a tree by its fruits. How is materialistic, success-driven Christianity helping our society? Are all the red-neon crosses you see in our cities the true light of the church? Our country leads the world, true enough in alcoholism, sexual assault, car accidents, and hellish academic pressures. Our mission consists in bragging about our per-capita national income. Meanwhile we've buried our mountains and rivers in trash and filled the city sky with smog. We need to come to our senses and stop trying to deceive God. The Christianity spread today is like the food sold in the markets, full of poisonous chemicals and nicely packaged. We must stop using Jesus' name to sell fake Christianity.

I just described my Christian village in the mountains, but not everything there was good. Wherever Christianity came to a village, our traditional culture was destroyed and stamped out as superstition and idol worship. We Christians gave up our beautiful customs and adopted Christmas as our main holiday, going crazy over Santa Claus, Rudolph, Christmas trees, and Christmas cards.

I don't deny that traditional culture included bad customs as well as good. But can it be right to reject all aspects of a culture that has shaped our souls for tens of thousands of years? God is present even without Christianity; he doesn't need churchgoers in order to work. Whether or not a country is Christian, God reigns. He has ruled the universe for countless ages. The missionaries think that God depends on them and their preaching that he trails after them, staying only where they have been. But long before Christianity was preached, God watched over the whole world. People may not have known him with their minds, but their hearts could feel him.

I remember when my friend Pan-son's mother was alive. Once her next-door neighbor, a woman who had just had a baby, was starving. Pan-son's mother took rice from the urn in the dragon god's shrine and cooked it for them. The rice in that jar wasn't just for the dragon god, but saved the lives of dying people and a miracle.

Similarly, it used to be a common custom that when a family member went on a long journey, the family would fill a bowl of rice for them at every meal. That food was served to any wayfarer who came unexpectedly; even the poorest houses never sent visitors away hungry, and better-off households always kept a room empty for travelers. People working in the fields who sat down for lunch would call out to a passerby inviting him to share their meal.

Calling these customs superstition and idol worship profanes something sacred. The apostle Paul said that even faith that moves mountains is nothing without love. You can travel the whole world on evangelization campaigns, building churches with thousands of members, but it's nothing if you don't love people. Even if you memorize the Bible, heal thousands of sick people, or get a doctorate from a first-rate seminary, it's nothing if you can't show love in the commonplace ways.

Korea's churches need to relearn these lessons. If we rediscover the true gospel of Jesus, not the Westernized gospel, we will find the breath of God. We'll see that he has been working in our country ever since he created the world.

Years ago I dreamed of building a new kind of church, but actually that misses the point that the whole universe is God's church. My only wish is to live uprightly within it together with all nature human beings, animals, and plants each serving the other. This is what God wants; this is why he sent Jesus to earth. Jesus taught us to love by serving one another, and he shed his blood and died for this. The real idols and real demons in our land are imperialism, war, nuclear weapons, dictatorship, and violence.

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