

~Other Speakers S-Z: John Sung:

The modern Church, much like ancient Israel, has never been very comfortable with God's prophetic people. In every corner of the Church today you can find those who are echoing the words of stubborn King Ahab - "Is that you, (Elijah) you TROUBLER of Israel?" (I Kings 18:17). Usually when something tastes unpleasant to us, we try to add something else to sweeten it up. Because contemporary Christendom is so uncomfortable with the prophetic voice of repentance, some are trying to redefine the role of a prophet as one who merely encourages the Church about future events. Prophets are not placed in our midst to sing us sweet lullabies, they are the alarm system for the House of God! Leonard Ravenhill described the role of a prophet this way, "Prophets are God's emergency men for crisis hours. They thrive on perplexity, override adversity, defeat calamity, bring the new wine of the Kingdom to burst withered wineskins of orthodoxy, and birth revival."

One of the most unique prophetic men of the Twentieth Century was the revivalist, John Sung. He operated as a true apostolic evangelist, with countless signs and wonders following his ministry. Unlike any other modern saint that I have ever studied, John Sung epitomizes that rare combination of New Testament purity and power. His life and ministry were powerfully marked by a genuine prophetic anointing. He was the embodiment of a burning zeal, unquenchable passion and an unrelenting fearlessness. Some called him the "John Wesley of China," while others called him "the Ice-Breaker" or the "Apostle of Revival." Most everyone who has ever witnessed or studied his ministry, considers him to be one of the greatest revivalist of our century. Yet to our great shame and loss he has been pitifully forgotten and neglected by most of the Western Church. He is the forgotten prophet of the forgotten Chinese revival of 1927-1937.

John Sung was born on September 27, 1901 in Hinghwa of the Fukien province in southeast China. He was the son of a respected Methodist minister and was converted as a young boy at the age of nine. In 1920 John Sung at age nineteen left for America to study at Wesleyan University of Ohio. He later went on to study at Ohio State University and Union Theological Seminary. Within five years and two months from the day he entered college, he earned three academic degrees: a Bachelor of Science, a Master of Science and a Doctor of Philosophy, all while doing menial labor on a full time basis. However, these high honors did not come without taking a great toll on his spiritual life. After a few years in America, sitting under a steady diet of worldly philosophy and liberal theology, John Sung found himself backslidden and doubting everything that his father had taught him.

On February 10, 1927, around the same time when revival was starting to break out in China, John Sung recommitted his life to the Lord Jesus Christ. This was just the beginning of a much deeper work. After repenting of his sins he was suddenly filled with an inexpressible joy. He immediately began to preach to all his classmates and professors. This drastic change in John Sung's behavior made some believe that he had become mentally unbalanced. He soon found himself being committed to an insane asylum by the seminary authorities. He was allowed to take with him only his Bible and a fountain pen. He would later refer to that asylum as his true theological seminary. John Sung was incarcerated for 193 days, a little more than six months. During that time he read the Bible from beginning to end forty times. He devoted almost every waking hour to reading the Bible and prayer. Through those months of quiet solitude, the Holy Spirit was carefully laying the foundations for John Sung's revival ministry. He was being prepared to participate in one of the mightiest revivals of the twentieth century.

After finally being discharged, John boarded a ship on October 4, 1927 bound for Shanghai. "He had been seven and a half years in the United States. He was now a man of outstanding scholastic attainments, and doubtless any of the national universities of China would have welcomed his services. . ." In spite of all the possible opportunities that his education could afford him, John Sung was determined to go home and preach to his countrymen. He realized that what China needed most was not more science teachers but preachers of the gospel. One day as the ship neared its destination, he gathered up all his diplomas, medals and fraternity keys and threw them overboard into the ocean. The only exception was his doctors diploma, which he kept only for the benefit of his father. Like Paul, John Sung could say, "What things were gain to me, these I have counted loss for Christ" (Phil. 3: 7). After arriving back in China, John Sung was soon married and then later joined the Bethel Bible School of Shanghai. It wasn't long before he became the school's field evangelist. He allied himself with Andrew Gih and a few other graduates from the school to form the "Bethel Evangelistic Band." God used this apostolic team mightily to spread the fires of revival all over China as they went forth preaching and singing the gospel. When John Sung was not behind the pulpit, he was reserved and even subdued. However, when preaching he was a man of fervency and intense emotions. He often would pace back and forth across the platform or sometimes leap over the Communion rail. At other times he would walk up and down the aisles to point his finger at someone in the audience and then run back to the front of the church and then stand on the Communion rail to finish his sermon.

He always emphasized repentance and the need for complete restitution where it was at all possible. He fearlessly denounced all sin and hypocrisy wherever he found it, especially among hardened ministers. Yet he also moved audiences with the message of Christ's tender and unfailing love, like few others could. Dr. Sung's meetings were always accompanied by a tremendous amount of conviction and brokenness over sin. It was not uncommon for hundreds of people to be seen with tears streaming down their faces and crying out for mercy. Convicted sinners frequently would rush forward to openly confess their sins before the whole congregation. "In the course of his preaching, Dr. Sung often received the gift of prophecy." On several occasions he pointed out the sins of some backslidden pastor with an incredible and fearful accuracy. Leslie T. Lyall writes, "Sometimes he would single out an individual, a pastor or office bearer in the church, and say, 'There is sin in your heart!' And he was always right."

When John Sung was not actively preaching or organizing a new evangelistic team, he usually could be found writing in his diary or adding to his ever growing prayer list. He carefully prayed over an extensive list of people's needs, which was accompanied by dozens of small photographs. John Sung was a faithful intercessor and always requested a small picture of those desiring prayer in order to help him intercede with a deeper burden. Everywhere he went, he urged the people to give themselves to prayer. "The fact that the Chinese Church is a praying Church today, can be attributed in part to the influence and example of this man who prayed." Nothing was allowed to hinder his time in prayer. John Sung made it his regular habit to be up every morning at 5 a.m. to pray for two or three hours. "Prayer for John Sung was like a battle. He prayed until the sweat poured down his face." At times he would literally collapse upon his bed and uncontrollably weep and sob under the burden of travailing prayer. John Sung believed that prayer was the most important work of the believer. He defined faith as watching God work while on your knees. Mr. Boon Mark said of John Sung, "He talked least, preached more and prayed most."

Because it was evident that John Sung was a man of great power in prayer, the sick and crippled increasingly came to him to receive prayer for their bodies. John Sung always made time to tenderly pray for their needs. "Dr. Sung usually had one meeting in every campaign at which he would give an address on healing and the necessity for sincere repentance before inviting the sick to come forward." Hundreds were instantly healed of every kind of ailment and disease. The blind received their sight; the lame walked, and the deaf and mute were all wonderfully healed as John Sung cried out to Jesus in prayer. Sometimes he would personally lay hands on and pray for as many as 500-600 people at one time. In spite of the fact that so many marvelous healings followed his ministry, he suffered for years from intestinal tuberculosis. This disease consistently plagued him with painful and infected bleeding ulcers in his colon. Nevertheless he still continued to fervently preach, sometimes in a kneeling position to lessen the terrible pain. Finally after years of suffering with this affliction, he died at only 43, on August 18, 1944.

John Sung was a true revival pioneer. He lead multiplied thousands of Chinese and Southeast Asians into new realms of spiritual power and reality. The call of revival, is a call to be a pioneer! If we are serious about revival, we must be willing to go places where the modern Church has never been or has long forgotten. Therefore we must stop looking to contemporary Christianity for the steps to our revival dreams and visions. We cannot afford to let the Church's present weakness and failure steal our hope and faith for a future revival. God is not calling us to imitate the weak things around us. He is inviting us to believe Him for the power and purity of the Church as seen in the New Testament! Our seventy years are finished, and it's time for us to stop listening to Sanballat and Tobiah and get busy rebuilding the House of Prayer (Dan 9:1-3, Ezra 1:1-5).

Resources Used : John Sung by Leslie T. Lyall, The Diaries of John Sung translated by Stephen L. Sheng, The Revival in Indonesia by Kurt Koch, Go Home and Tell by Bertha Smith, The Theology of Revival in the Chinese Christian Church, 1900-1949 by Chun Kwan Lee, Into God's Family by Andrew Gih, Launch out into the Deep by Andrew Gih, Twice Born and Then? by Andrew Gih, The Shantung Revival by Mary K. Crawford, The Awakening: Revival in China 1927-1937 by Marie Monsen