

Revivals And Church History :: Sundar Singh, John Sung and future of Asian Christianity By HWA YUNG

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By HWA YUNG

WHILE speaking at a chapel of a local theological college, I mentioned the names of Sadhu Sundar Singh and Dr John Sung. The looks I received told me immediately that a sizable majority of the congregation was asking "Sadhu WHAT" and "John WHO".

The same students would probably have had no difficulties rattling names like Kathryn Kuhlman, Billy Graham, Oral Roberts, John Stott, John Wimber, Peter Wagner, and others off the top of their heads. Yet the names of respectively the most influential Indian Christian ever lived and the greatest Chinese revivalist-cum-evangelist of the 20th century seem so strange to many!

Sundar Singh (1889-1929), or Sadhu Sundar Singh, as he is commonly known, came from a well-to-do farming family in Punjab. In addition to the high ideals of the Sikh religion, his own devout mother brought him up in the Hindu bhakti tradition. In his later years, Sundar Singh often said that his mother made him a sadhu (a holy man in India) but the Holy Spirit made him a Christian. He knew the Granth, Sikhism's holy book, and memorised the Bhagavad Gita by the age of seven!

At the local mission school, his rebellious spirit made him a most difficult student during Bible classes. He even led the local boys in stoning visiting Christian evangelists at the marketplace!

But the sudden death of his beloved mother when he was 14 brought about the great crisis of his life. For days he struggled. Nothing comforted him. In his anger he even burnt parts of the Bible. Finally one night he resolved that unless God met him, he would commit suicide by laying himself on the railway track. As he waited upon God, yet not knowing what to expect, suddenly a light appeared in his room. To his utter amazement, he saw Jesus Christ, radiant with glory, love and peace, looking at him with compassion and asking, "Why do you persecute me? I died for you Å..."

The consequence of his conversion was deadly serious. For the family and the Sikh community, it was a matter of highest honour. When every form of kindly persuasion failed to change his mind, he was forced to leave home. In the process he miraculously survived an attempt to poison him. Finally at 16, he was legally old enough to be baptised. Around that time he resolved to devote his life to preach the Gospel as a Christian sadhu. For the rest of his life, he lived in utter simplicity. Dressed in the ochre robes of an Indian holy man, he preached the Gospel throughout the Indian sub-continent.

One of his deepest burdens was to bring the Gospel to Tibet, the stronghold of Lamaistic Buddhism and the legendary "Forbidden Land". He made regular trips over Himalayan mountain trails, sometimes in terrible weather conditions, and often in face of intense opposition and persecution, towards this goal. In 1929 he attempted once more to reach Tibet. But he was never seen again!

John Sung (1901-1944) came from the home of a godly Methodist pastor. Even as a younger teenager, the "Little Pastor", as he was known, would assist his father in preaching. At 19, God wonderfully provided for him to study in America. A brilliant student, he sailed through his studies all the way to a Ph.D in chemistry in less than six years.

Although the world lay at his feet, his heart was restless until he yielded to God's call to return to China to preach the Gospel. After another eventful year he sailed home in 1927. As the boat neared China, he took all the gold medals and diplomas he had won at university, with the exception of his doctoral certificate, and threw them into the ocean. For the next 14 years, he burnt his life out for Christ.

His preaching ministry took him all over China and South-east Asia. His ministry hit the churches like an earthquake. Tens of thousands found Christ, hundreds of churches revived, and many healed. Talk to those in their 70s and 80s who witnessed his ministry in the 1920s and 1930s, and you will invariably see a glint in their eyes.

His active ministry ended only when his health finally broke. An operational wound from his student days never healed. But his sense of urgency prevented him from taking time off to undergo the treatment required. When he finally entered hospital in December 1940, it was too late. The fistulas were about one foot deep! He languished in that condition until his death almost four years later.

Although his ministry ended too late to save his own life, his sense of God's timing was perfect. War had already engulfed China by that time, and in another year, the rest of East Asia. Had he pressed his ministry with less urgency, much less would have been achieved because later war conditions would have prevented travel. So he completed his task.

Asked shortly before his death about the future of the Chinese church, he revealed that God had showed him that a great revival was coming. But the Western missionaries would all leave first. Subsequent history proved that this was the most profound prophecy uttered about the Chinese church in the 20th century!

What do these two men's lives have to say to us concerning the future of Asian Christianity? There are at least four things. First, both men spent hours in prayer daily, although in different ways. Sundar Singh would regularly fall into long periods of ecstasy and visions in the midst of prayer. John Sung was the ultimate intercessor, pleading intensely before God for hours for revival.

One eyewitness in Sitiawan saw as a little girl how at the end of his prayer sessions, his singlet was so drenched in sweat that her mother could actually wring it out like water! At the same time, the records revealed that both men placed central importance on the Bible and spent much time meditating on it. Do the Bible and prayer have the same place in our lives?

Second, both men lived lives of simplicity, holiness and sacrifice. Sundar Singh followed the way of poverty of a sadhu. He ate whatever was offered and slept wherever available. He accepted no monetary gifts. Once, when well-wishers insisted on giving him money by throwing it into his train as it was leaving, he quietly picked it up and gave it to the first beggar at the next station. John Sung handed all his love gifts over to a committee to oversee their disposal. At times he used the same gifts to subsidise the cost of the revival and evangelistic campaigns when local funds fell low. Everywhere he went, he proclaimed the centrality of the cross and called fearlessly for repentance, regardless of high or low. For this, many, including pastors and missionaries, disliked him intensely.

Neither sought to build any church, organisation or kingdom of his own, but worked with whichever church or group that welcomed them. Hence the widespread impact of their respective ministries. The examples of John Sung and Sundar Singh provide an interesting contrast with many travelling preachers (especially the "Prosperity Gospel" variety) and church leaders today. If the church is to impact Asia significantly today, we need to recover the same spirit of simplicity, holiness and sacrifice.

Thirdly, the church worldwide in the last few decades has been hit by the pentecostal-charismatic renewal. Many think that this originated largely from the American pentecostal tradition dating back to Azusa Street in 1906. However, this perception is increasingly being recognised as a distorted Western reading of church history. In fact "signs and wonders" have often marked revival movements throughout history, especially in the non-Western world.

Sundar Singh and John Sung read the Bible through Asian eyes, took the supernatural and the Holy Spirit seriously, and the rest followed. Sundar Singh's ministry was marked by regular contact with the spiritual realm through visions, angelic encounters and the miraculous.

John Sung exercised multiple spiritual gifts, including prophecy, healing, tongues and evangelism with tremendous authority. His long-time missionary colleague, William Schubert, writing in 1976, compared him with all the great preachers he had heard, including Billy Graham. He concluded that, "Dr John Sung was probably the greatest preacher of this century. (He) surpassed them all in pulpit power". Clearly Sundar Singh and John Sung demonstrated an anointing which far exceeds that of most pentecostal-charismatic preachers today. Yet so few of us have bothered to learn from them!

Fourthly, both men saw the inadequacies of a merely Western Christianity, and how its foreignness hindered the Gospel's advance in Asia. Sundar Singh noted that Indians needed the "water of life", but they want it in an Indian cup, not a Western one. He saw clearly that living as a sadhu gave both the evangelist and the Gospel maximum entrance into Indian society.

John Sung was fully aware of the contribution of missionaries. Nevertheless, he repeatedly noted in his diaries that Western control and dependency on Western funds often prevented the Chinese church from growing. He urged the churches instead to become self-supporting, take responsibility for themselves, and trust God for every need. This vision found its out-working in the ministry of many, including Wang Ming Dao, the Beijing pastor of later fame.

In their own ways, both John Sung and Sundar Singh worked towards Asian church independence and developing a genuinely indigenous Christian identity. Yet to this day, some 60 to 70 years later, we have yet to fully understand their concern.

Christianity in much of Asia is still viewed by most as an "orang putih" (white man's) religion. Although we may be organizational and financially independent, much of the church remains in Western captivity. Our music and worship, hymns and theology, concerns and agenda, and so forth remain largely Western. Yet, there are two reasons at least why we must take seriously the concern for an indigenous Christian identity.

The first is that everywhere in Asia people are seeking to recover their indigenous cultural roots. Witness the resurgence of the traditional religions all over Asia today. If a Western Christianity was a hindrance to the advance of the Gospel in early 20th century, it is no less so today. If you think otherwise, you might want to ask why Buddhism has been growing faster than Christianity in the 1990s in Singapore -- possibly the most westernised city in Asia.

The second reason is this. The latest headlines over homosexual bishops in the Anglican churches in America and Britain constitute merely the tip of the iceberg. Western churches are in serious decline and, indeed, have been so for decades. Why then are we still always looking to them for guidance and inspiration? Of course there is still much we can learn from them. But certainly we should not be constantly looking over our shoulders to Western Christianity for leadership and direction. Instead, we should look to the Holy Spirit and the Bible. Only this will make possible the emergence of a truly indigenous Christian identity, without which the churches in the non-Western world will never mature!

For a number of years, one of my prayers has been that God will raise up for the Asian church many more Sundar Singhs and John Sung. Will you not pray likewise?

(Bibliography: For Sundar Singh see Phyllis Thompson, Sadhu Sundar Singh & A. J. Appasamy (ed.), *The Cross is Heaven-The Life and Writings of Sadhu Sundar Singh*. For John Sung see Leslie T. Lyall, *John Sung-Flame of God for the Far East*, 4th ed. & *The Diaries of John Sung-An Autobiography*, trl Stephen L. Sheng.)

taken from: <http://www.methodistmessage.com/oct2003/asianchristianity.html>

Re: Sundar Singh, John Sung and future of Asian Christianity By HWA YUNG - posted by sermonindex (), on: 2004/6/17

I thought this was an interesting article for the most part because of the mention of these two men of God. I do not totally agree with all the conclusion and comments made but it is worth a look if you are interested in the topic of revival of religion. Surely anyone who would take the time to look at the lives of John Sung and Sundar Singh would realize quickly it would not be a waste of time. I have been tremendously blessed by reading small biographies on both men and I am looking forward to looking more into their lives as the Lord leads as an example to follow hard after the LORD.

Re: Asian Christianity - posted by revival9 (), on: 2004/6/17 1:21

This week, my family and I are watching a 4-hour DVD documentary "The Cross: Jesus in China" produced by China Soul for Christ www.chinasoul.org (available from Voice of the Martyrs www.persecution.com) We just read "The Heavenly Man: The remarkable true story of Chinese Christian Brother Yun" by Paul Hattaway. www.asiaharvest.org The most AMAZING book I've ever read. What God is doing with Chinese Christians is the book of Acts and then some.

"Back to Jerusalem" by Paul Hattaway is also incredible. Revival has taken China by storm. The house churches are sending out thousands of missionaries to evangelise every country between China and Jerusalem. Many stories of house church leaders and Chinese Christian history.

Two free must-have tapes: Brother Taisto "God's Marvelous Work in China" and Paul Hattaway "The Triumphant Church in China" from www.charityministries.org Brother Taisto translates for Brother Yun, who was supposed to preach at Charity Christian Fellowship that day but didn't, I don't know why. (Charity is a huge on-fire revival-centered church in Lancaster, PA) These tapes started the recent fire in my house! Utterly astounding. True stories of God's power and love in th

e most impossible situations.

Re: Sundar Singh, John Sung and future of Asian Christianity By HWA YUNG - posted by crsschk (), on: 2004/6/17 11:4

Thanks Greg,

Can still recall first hearing about Sundar Singh on a Sunday radio program one morning, had me pulled over to the side of the road to listen in and scrambling to write down his name. Both of these men are fascinating.

Respecting the different cultures there is sure to be some variants and sadly I can see where they would have a problem with a lot of "Western Christianity" so do we! Do agree with this statement though:

Quote:

-----If the church is to impact Asia significantly today, we need to recover the same spirit of simplicity, holiness and sacrifice.

Would only add, not just Asia...

revival9

Yes! Charity Ministrys is a great resource, have begun recently to recieve "The Remnant" from them, an outstanding publication.

Still have yet to get the DVD's on the underground church, there has been some talk prior about them here in other post's...

It is incredible to hear what is happening in other parts of the world, may our prayers be with them.