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An Asian Critique of Church Movements in Japan

Gyoji Nabetani

STAGNATION OF CHURCH GROWTH IN JAPAN

After the Korean War ended in 1953, Japan started to move in the direction of gigantic economic growth. It led the people's minds to the materialistic and economic world rather than to the spiritual one. The radical students' movement started in 1968 and badly influenced the Christian Church and hampered the organizational function of many church groups: the United Church of Christ (Kyodan), the Free Methodist Church, and so on. A pessimistic mood now prevails over the church. In 1977, AP journalist Anderson sent a report from Tokyo to the U.S.A., saying, "Mission work in Japan in these thirty years has failed, after all." He had met Shusaku Endo who said, "There was a large growth of Christian numbers for seven or eight years after the war, but many of them came to the church for their needs: food, spiritual trustworthiness, learning English, and so on. When society got back its stability and prosperity, people no longer felt the need to go to church." Anderson also met another Christian writer, Hisashi Inoue, who no longer is a confessing Christian. He said, "I owed much to Christianity, for I was brought up in a Christian orphanage. I shall never forget the kindness of a Christian missionary who devoted himself to serve orphans. I sometimes wondered why he was so kind. 'Does he have a hidden motivation to sell us to a circus?' But he served us with a sincere heart. I found his god to be different from ours. For Japanese, human relationship itself is god. There is no absolute god. Therefore, the motivation of our baptism itself is the motivation of leaving the church. One who was baptized with the motivation of satisfying self-respect leaves the church with one of self-respect. One who was baptized in a process of learning English from a missionary leaves the church when he is able to speak English. I was baptized when I was poor and left the church when I was no longer poor. One who had trouble with a girl and sought salvation from the church leaves there with a new girl. We do not deepen our motivation but live in a delicate human relationship. We do not need an absolute god." From the words of these Christian writers, it is natural that Christian Church growth has stabilized in the present situation where everything is possible.

Four types of the church

Ordinarily, the Protestant churches are analyzed into four types of **p.74** the church. These types are called by the names of places, or by the names of the representatives.

- (1) Yokohama band: Uemura type.
- (2) Kumamoto band: Ebina type.
- (3) Matsue band: Nakata type.
- (4) Sapporo band: Uchimura type.

1) Yokohama band: Uemura type tradition.

The first Japanese Christian Church of the Protestant tradition was organized in Yokohama on March 19, 1872. It was constituted by a company of young Japanese Christian men who studied under Dr. Brown. Among these were some who were to become outstanding Christian pastors and educators over the next two generations, men

such as Kajinosuke Ibuka (1854–1940) and Masahisa Uemura (1858–1925). Uemura became the most influential pastor in Japan in the Presbyterian-Reformed tradition and is regarded as the one who established the “church-type tradition” in Japan.

2) Kumamoto band: Ebina type tradition

The Kumamoto band was formed in Kyushuu. Captain L. L. Janes, a graduate of West Point, was invited in 1871 by the daimyo (lord) of Higo, through the secretariat of the Board of Foreign Missions of the Reformed Church, to open a school in the castle town of Kumamoto. His Christian influence was very strong so that many young students became Christians. This was a terrible shock to their parents who had never thought about religions other than Shintoism or Buddhism. About thirty students who persisted in keeping their Christian faith were forced to leave Kumamoto and were sent to Kyoto, where Nijima (1843–90) started Doshisha university and formed the Kumamoto Band tradition. As Nijima died young, Ebina (1856–1937) became the representative of its tradition. It emphasized social action from the beginning and established the social action tradition in Japan.

3) Matsue band: Nakata type tradition

The Matsue band was started by Barclay F. Buxton (1860–1946) who started the work in Matsue. But this tradition is called by the name of Jyuuji Nakata (1879–1939) who founded the Holiness church in Japan. He emphasized renewal, holiness, healing and advent, while his group has been strong in evangelism, which made him the representative of the evangelism-type tradition. After the Second [p. 75](#) World War, many missionaries came to Japan, most of whom have joined into this tradition, which is now called “Fukuin-ha” (“The Evangelicals”). The recent Billy Graham crusade has been carried mainly by the leaders of this group. Japan Conference of Evangelism held at Kyoto on June 7–10 1982 was also promoted mainly by this group. The Japan Evangelical Theological Society has also many members of this group, while it has also many members from the church tradition group, such as the Reformed, the Lutherans, etc.

4) Sapporo band: Uchimura type tradition

The Sapporo Band was founded in the capital of Hokkaido and is hence called “Sapporo Band”. William S. Clark who was invited by the national government in 1876 to establish an agricultural school served only one year, but his influence upon young Japanese students was so great that they formed the Sapporo band tradition, from which Kanzo Uchimura (1861–1930) appeared as its representative. This group emphasized Bible study and Uchimura began the Mukyokai (Non-church) movement.

CRISIS, NOT OF CHRISTIANITY, BUT OF THE CHURCH-TYPE TRADITION

Even though Christians are few, the Church’s ethical impact, contribution through education, social welfare work, YMCA and YWCA, etc. are very big. The members of the social action tradition, the evangelism-type tradition and the Bible study tradition never think they have failed. But the church-type tradition is in crisis. From 1968, the biggest church, Kyodan has been thrown into chaos and the number of members is decreasing in these years, from its peak of 200,000 in 1970 to 190,000 in 1980. The number of church attendants on Sunday is about 59,000. The total congregations are 1,690, the number of ministers are about 2,200. The average Sunday attendance is 30 for a congregation. The

total budget of '80 was about 4.7 bil. in which 62% was spent for salary. Next is the Anglican. The total numbers are 55,000; there are 275 congregations with 340 ministers. The average Sunday attendance is 34. The third is the Baptists. Members: 35,000. Congregations, 500 with 630 ministers.

Lutherans	28,000
Nihon Kirisuto	13,600
Immanuel	11,000
Seventh Day Adventist	9,500
Nihon Iesuo	8,500
Salvation Army	8,200
Holiness	8,100
Reformed	7,600
Assembly of God	7,500
Domei	6,000
Nazarene	4,500
Free Methodist	3,500

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According to the statistics in '81, the total number of Christians is 1,220,000, which is about 1% of the total population of Japan. Catholics are 396,000; Jesus no Mitama, 140,000; Genshi Fukuin, 50,000; Watch-Tower, 54,000 (besides, Toitsu Genri, 270,000?). The Protestants are less than half a million and only 1/4 seem to attend the Sunday service, which indicates a crisis of the church-type tradition (and also a warning to the evangelism tradition). Besides the number reported in statistics, there are many Christians who belong to the Non-church movement. It is very difficult to count them, for they have no organization, no office, no committee; the definition of a Christian is completely different, because it depends on their inner conviction whether they think themselves to be Christians or not. In the year book of Christianity, there are only about 50 meetings of Non-church movement, or Bible study groups, but some say that more than a million people are non-church people. The most important point is that they do not think that they have failed, but rather been successful especially through many influential persons, such as the late prime minister Ohira, the late Yanaibara (President of Tokyo

University), Fujibayashi (the former head of the Supreme Court) and many, many professors, especially related to Tokyo University. They emphasize Bible study, a simple fellowship and a prayer life. More than 1.3 mil. Bibles are sold every year and the complete work, or selected work of Uchimura are one of the hidden best sellers even today.

KANZO UCHIMURA

Kanzo Uchimura was born in 1861 as a son of the Samurai class. He had an ethical background of Confucianism and of the Samurai spirit. He graduated from Sapporo agricultural school in 1881, where he was baptized. When he went to the States in 1884, he was shocked to see the immorality and evils related to the churches, while he was convinced of the truth of the Bible and the redemption by Jesus Christ. He says about the Bible, "To the Christian, the Bible is a single book, as certainly as is Hamlet or Divina Commedia. The author is one, the plan is one, the spirit is one, and the truth is one. The Bible is a cosmos, a unity in diversities. He who lived the Bible, and not merely read it, knows that it is so. Apart from orthodoxy, by the sheer force of logics of experiences, he is compelled to believe that it is so. Not a word is to be added unto it, nor a word is to be taken away from it." (The complete works of Uchimura Kanzo. Vol. III. p.122). He says about the States, "Modernism and Americanism—Modernism **p. 77** in all its phases is nothing but love of pleasure rather than love of God. It is an attempt to get the greatest amount of pleasure out of this globe of only eight thousand miles in diameter, in a span of life of only three score years and ten. Instead of saying, the earth is the Lord's and the fulness thereof, Modernism says: earth is man's and the fulness thereof. It exhausts one source of resources after another, and never gives thanks to the Creator; and in its eagerness to enjoy the present life, it pays no attention to the welfare of the future generation. And Americanism is the most developed form of Modernism, and in the name of science and progress, it is leading the whole world into swift destruction. May God deliver us from Modernism and Americanism!" (*op. cit.* p. 196)

Seeing the evils caused by many denominations, he distinguished between Jesus and the Church, saying, "It is certain that Jesus had no idea of founding what we mean by the Church. He expected the 'little flock' that he had gathered around him to endure as such, but only till the Father's purpose to give the Kingdom was fulfilled ... The word 'Church' never occurs in the gospels, save in two passages of Matthew, one textually doubtful, both recognized by all modern students as belonging to that element of Matthew which is latest and has the least claim to authenticity." (*op. cit.* p. 28)

He came back from the States in 1888 and started to teach in the new government academy in Tokyo, the Dai Ichi Koto Chu Gakko, which is now included in the course of Tokyo University. In January 1891, the teachers of Tokyo school were compelled to participate in a ceremony of bowing head to a personally signed copy of the Imperial Rescript on Education. Uchimura boldly took his stand and did not bow. He was disemployed and suffered from poverty, enmities of friends and enemies, during which he wrote famous books such as *A Comfort as a Christian*, *How I Became a Christian* etc. In 1897, he became a journalist in Yorozu Choho News Paper in Tokyo, and in 1900 he started to publish "The Bible Study" and started his Bible study class in his home at Tsunohazu near the academy, from where many professors and leaders of Japan came out. As the Russo-Japanese War of 1904–1905 approached, Uchimura opposed this war and resigned from his post as journalist. He had been concentrating on publishing "Bible Study" and to continuing the Bible study class, and he never intended to establish any organization. **p. 78**

EVALUATION OF NON-CHURCH MOVEMENT

There are many things that emerge from Uchimura's personality as a Christian,

1) his bold attitude in criticizing Western civilization and church denominationalism, etc. and also in taking a stand against Imperialism and Emperor-worship although he lost his position.

2) But he also had weaknesses. His influence has been rather limited to the circle of intelligent people near Tokyo University.

3) As Uchimura committed himself to the Bible and all his followers love and diligently study the Bible (many of them read the Bible in Greek), it is impossible to criticize his movement from the stand that the Bible is the word of God. It is the matter of interpretation when they deny the doctrine of the church and of the sacraments.

4) As Carlo Calderola clarifies indigenization into three categories, acceptance type, protest type and compromise type, Uchimura's theology is clarified into the protest type. Today, the world has become small and it is not the time of one-way traffic but of mutual fellowship and co-operation. The strong inferiority complex which made Uchimura's theology sharp must be re-evaluated from the perspective of the Holy Apostolic Catholic Church.

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Biblical Foundations: A Latin American Study

C. René Padilla

An *evangelical* theology can never be less than a *biblical* theology. God has spoken and his Word has been scripturated in the Bible. If theology is to keep continuity with God's Word, therefore, it must necessarily be under the authority of Scripture. An evangelical theology is by definition one that recognizes the normativity of the Scriptures in which the Evangel has been recorded. In practical terms, it is a theology which constantly takes into account the classical principles of biblical hermeneutics related to the literary context, the language, history and culture.

An evangelical theology, however, cannot be biblical in the sense of being limited to a grammatical-historical interpretation of Scripture. Theology includes but is far more than exegesis. It is the result of a process of transposing the Word of God from its original Hebrew or Graeco-Roman *milieu* into a contemporary situation, for the purpose of producing in the modern readers or hearers the same kind of impact that the original message was meant to produce in its original historical context.¹

¹ For a more detailed treatment of the purpose of hermeneutics, see my paper on "Hermeneutics and Culture—a Theological Perspective" in *Gospel and Culture*, eds. John Stott & Robert T. Coote (Pasadena: William Carey Library, 1979).