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마태복음 Matthew 18: 19-20

Again, truly I tell you, if two of you agree on earth about anything you ask, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven. For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them. (NRSV)

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# Transformative Preaching in the Transitioning Korean American Church

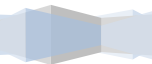
Tae Kyung Kim, D. Min. Fuller Theological Seminary, Pasadena, CA, 2000

## Summary

“The Word is not for information but for transformation.” This is the basic assumption with which Dr. Tae Kyung Kim begins his dissertation, *“Transformative Preaching in the Transitioning Korean American Church.”* As the Bible consists of the stories of the people who were changed by the Word of God, what needs to happen in preaching is the transformation of the listeners. However, because of an informative preaching style and a lack of understanding of the context of the transitioning Korean-American church, transformation of listeners has become difficult to achieve. In this work, Dr. Kim tries to find better ways to deliver the Word of God to bring about the transformation of listeners in the Korean-American immigrant church.

In chapter 1, Dr. Kim opens this study by reviewing the biblical and theological foundations of preaching. First, preaching stands upon its faithfulness to the Bible. Preachers are called not to preach their ideas but to preach the Bible, which is itself centered in the work of God through Jesus Christ. Second, preaching is an act of preaching theology. However, this does not mean that theology precedes preaching. Rather, preaching precedes theology because theology comes from the revelation of God which occurs in preaching: “God has revealed Himself in His acts and through His speech. Thus we can know God whom we proclaim.”<sup>1</sup> In preaching we not only hear about but also experience God as a reality. Third, the task of preaching is to transform listeners so that they can have a new way of life in Christ in this foreign land, the United States.

In the three points above, preaching the Bible does not simply mean preaching the text. The context of the listeners should be seriously considered, because “the text cannot exist itself alone without the context of life.”<sup>2</sup> Therefore, Korean preachers need to tell Korean-American



immigrants the biblical stories of sojourners who left their homeland to reach the Promised Land.. Even though many Korean immigrants came to the United State to achieve the American dream, they experienced the limitations of life in a foreign land, because of a language barrier, lack of education, and so on. Many immigrants began to join the church and realized that it was God’s will for them to come to the United States to save them. Thus, preaching must help Korean immigrants in America realize that they are sojourners living in a foreign land, but at the same time, the Promised Land to fulfill God’s mission.

In chapter 2, Dr. Kim turns to the context of the Korean-American congregation. According to his investigation, it is hard to define the Korean-American congregation, because its culture and social status are diverse. Culturally, there are three groups among Korean immigrants: a “traditional Korean cultural group,” a “Korean-American cultural group,” and an “American cultural group.” Based on the language that they speak and the community to which they belong, members’ degree of assimilation into American culture varies. Socially, these groups are intermingled and comprise the congregation of the Korean-American Church. The traditional Korean cultural group, consisting mainly of first-generation Koreans, often has menial jobs, such as shoe repair or janitorial services. Younger generations who are more Americanized and more educated have better jobs, such as doctors or lawyers. Historically, Korean preaching has been greatly influenced by the topical sermons of the early Western missionaries to Korea. Because these sermons were fundamental in their theology and instructive in their teaching, many Korean preachers still place a strong emphasis on morality in their preaching. Furthermore, material blessing has been emphasized significantly, as Korea went through rapid industrialization and economic growth in the 1970s. Even though the Korean Church achieved memorable growth during this time, in many ways preaching lost its power to change the lives of individuals and the society. Because the immigration boom started in the 1970s and Korean immigrants were eager to protect their heritage in their new land, preaching barely experienced a change. Today, it is still true in the Korean-American Church that “preaching about material blessing, good health, and pious life are constant sermon topics.”<sup>3</sup>

In Dr. Kim’s analysis, he presents four important facets of Korean preaching. First, Korean pastors’ preaching is often dependent upon allegorical interpretation. What is important is the preacher’s spiritual but often unhistorical interpretation of the text rather than the literal,

historical, and above all—authentic meaning of the text. This gives more authority to the preacher, who already has tremendous authority under the influence of Confucianism, rather than to the Scripture. Second, Korean preaching is moralistic. This feature of Korean preaching often leads the congregation to forget the central message of the gospel—that they are forgiven by the grace of God. Third, Korean preaching is often fragmentary. Preachers try to interpret a whole text by using only a fragment from the passage, even though that fragment has no connection with the rest of the text. Fourth, Korean preaching is often atomistic in content. Each part of a sermon is emphasized, but the parts have no relationship to each other. Dr. Kim concludes that the life of the Korean-American congregation is still fragile because the Word of God has not been properly proclaimed in the church.

In chapter 3, Dr. Kim addresses the central issue of his work, transformation through preaching. True preaching brings transformation, as the Word promises: “my word...shall accomplish that which I purpose and prosper in the thing for which I set it” (Isaiah 55:11). He makes three observations about transformative preaching in his analysis. First, such preaching can bring personal transformation. Like the early Puritans who received strength from the Word as they settled in a foreign land, early Korean immigrants were eager to gather to listen to the Word of God, because transformation of life happened through preaching. They received comfort and encouragement in the midst of a busy and hard life. Now, however, Korean immigrants are compromising their Christian life for material success. Sunday attendance has become less important, and church is no longer a priority in their lives. However, they are, as human beings, still longing for spiritual food and the transformation which can happen through the proclamation of the Word: “Faith comes by hearing” (Romans 10:17). Second, transformative preaching can bring renewal to the church. Preaching can renew the church with fresh insight and new angles on Biblical truth.<sup>4</sup> The goal of the Korean church in the United States, however, has been numerical growth rather than personal transformation. Congregations and their members did not pay attention or contribute to the society in which they lived, even though they were making money through business with different ethnic groups among whom they lived. This is why African-Americans expressed their anger toward Koreans in the Los Angeles riot on April 29, 1993. Through preaching and the transformation of the church, such a

barrier can be destroyed. Third, transformative preaching can bring a renewal of society. The Word preached is the word of guidance for a contemporary world wandering without directions.

In chapter 4, Dr. Kim studies the life-equipping aspect of preaching. According to Dr. Kim, what the Word does in the lives of people is, first, meet personal needs. But, in order to do that, the preacher needs to have sensitivity to his or her congregation, and the sermon should be related to their lives. They are burdened by the responsibility of supporting their families in a foreign land. Only the healing and comforting Word of God can free them from such burdens. The second thing that the Word does is cause growth. Preaching causes growth in the lives of those who have been transformed. They become able to proclaim the Word to non-believers and to love others. The third thing that the Word does is discipline the Christian life. It is hard to speak about discipline in a postmodern world in which relativism dominates. However, there are certain rules in Christianity for the practice of faith, and these rules require discipline, because “without disciplines there are no disciples.”<sup>5</sup> Even though preachers fear the responses of people when they speak about Christian discipline, they should remember that there are still many people who want to be challenged and disciplined by the Word. For the discipline of life, preachers can encourage prayer, Bible reading, service to others, attendance at worship, financial giving, and church and community life. Through these acts, Korean-American churches can deepen the faith of individuals and their commitment to the community to which they belong. The fourth thing that the Word of God does is provide ethical guidelines and maturity to people. In the Korean-American Church, Christianity has little influence on social ethics and individual morality. Christianity has often been regarded as a system of micro-norms, such as not drinking or smoking. Through their sermons, preachers need to promote Christian ethics and encourage people to be mature and to consider the needs of society, which are larger than both the individual and the church.

In chapter 5, Dr. Kim finally unfolds a new way of preaching that will bring transformation to the Korean-American Church. The first characteristic of transformative preaching is that it is non-authoritative. The language of the Bible is not imperative but revelatory, and the authority in preaching belongs only to the revealer, God. However, the traditional way of Korean preaching has been authoritative. Korean preachers simply assume that they have authority, because what they deliver in preaching is the Word of God. But, they often

forget that “the preacher’s authority comes from how they live not from what they say.”<sup>6</sup> Koreans and Korean-Americans, living in the anti-authoritative culture of America, would rather give authority to a non-authoritative person with whom they can identify. The preacher, therefore, needs to build up a good relationship with his or her congregation through non-authoritative preaching based upon the understanding of the culture and context of the congregation. When preaching is real to the lives of the congregation, it will carry its own authority to change their lives.

The second characteristic of transformative preaching is that it is dialogical. Prophets of the Old Testament, Jesus, and the Apostle Paul were dialogical in their speech, preaching, and rhetoric. In contrast, preachers in the Korean-American Church, often deliver monologues, to which the congregation cannot relate their own lives. Preachers need to invite listeners into their preaching by allowing them to think and grow together. When members of the congregation find truth in doing so, there will be a willingness in their hearts to change their lives.

The third characteristic of transformative preaching is that it is narrative. Typical Korean preaching is topical, often composed of three or four main points explaining the title of the sermon. In this kind of preaching, the congregation knows from the beginning what they are going to hear. Involvement of the congregation, which is ignited by curiosity and expectation, hardly happens. In contrast, in narrative preaching listeners not only may identify themselves with the characters of the story but also may experience the transformation that occurs in a character’s life. Eugene Lowry’s homiletical plot starts with “upsetting the disequilibrium” but ends with “experiencing practical aspects of the gospel” and “anticipating the consequences.”<sup>7</sup>

The fourth characteristic of transformative preaching is that it is inductive. Typical Korean preaching is deductive in nature. The sermon starts with a declaration of intent, and the preacher proves it in the course of the sermon. Listeners to this preaching are passive receivers. In contrast, inductive preaching starts with illustrations, experiences, and examples, so that listeners can find and participate in the truth of the stories. However, inductive and deductive approaches to preaching do not exclude each other. Rather, they work together: “Induction discovers new knowledge; deduction clarifies it.”<sup>8</sup> By using ordinary life experiences with the Scripture, a preacher can allow listeners to relate their lives to the text and to experience the transformation of their hearts and lives. This non-authoritative, dialogical, narrative, and

inductive preaching will be able to transform the minds, hearts, and ultimately lives of contemporary Korean-American immigrants by inviting them to identify their experiences, as sojourners in a foreign land, with biblical characters and to experience the good news of Jesus Christ.

### **Evaluation**

Dr. Kim's search for transformative preaching in the transitioning Korean-American Church is the result of his conviction: "preaching should bring an event of a transformation to the hearers in order to equip them with the spirit to become doers of the Gospel."<sup>9</sup> This practical study on preaching and the Korean-American Church has two valuable points as its strengths.

First, Dr. Kim's work has a thorough analysis of the congregation of the Korean-American Church. There are four ingredients of preaching as Thomas G. Long points out: "congregation, preacher, sermon, and the presence of Christ."<sup>10</sup> But often, studies on Korean preaching disregard the first ingredient: the congregation.<sup>11</sup> In his work, however, Dr. Kim carefully analyzes congregations of the Korean-American Church in three dimensions: cultural, social, and historical. Even though people in the Korean-American Church share a Korean heritage as they live in the United States, the way they act, speak, see, and interpret things are different. Some are more Americanized; some are less Americanized. Some are more comfortable with traditional Korean worship, which has versicles and hymns; some are more comfortable with praise worship, which has contemporary Christian music. Social status, which is often determined by their job, also has a huge influence on their mindset. For those who have menial jobs in society, a position in the church, such as elder, is especially important, because they often find meaning in life and emotional satisfaction from their position. Furthermore, historically, they have been hearing authoritative, deductive, non-dialogical sermons in the church. Many of them receive the message of preaching without criticism, but transformation hardly happens in their lives. To affect this type of congregation, therefore, preachers need new ways to preach.

The purpose of Dr. Kim's analysis of the congregation, however, is not limited to deepening the understanding of who is listening to the message. It goes further to find a better way to deliver the message to the congregation. Understanding the cultural, social, and historical



experience of Korean immigrants is a necessity in order to use a transformative preaching style in the Korean-American Church. Non-authoritative, dialogical, narrative, and inductive preaching, which congregations have not experienced before, will attract the attention of different cultural and social groups in the Korean-American Church and lead them to experience the Gospel.

Second, Dr. Kim's work brings the reaction of listeners to the table in any discussion of preaching. As Fred B. Craddock points out, what is more important in communication, especially preaching, is not *what* is delivered but *how* it is delivered.<sup>12</sup> What is at stake in preaching the ultimate truth, the Gospel of Jesus Christ, is whether the message is accepted by the listeners. Even though the message contains truth and eternal life for listeners, if it is not accepted, the message has no value to the listeners. In traditional Korean preaching, however, the congregation was often considered secondary or less important than the preacher. Preachers have been so preoccupied with the notion that they deliver truth that they simply assume acceptance of the message by listeners. If it is not accepted, it is the listeners' fault.

However, Dr. Kim puts more emphasis on the listeners, rather than on the preacher. He points out: "[Jesus]...does not assume authority at the start: rather he seeks to achieve acceptance first."<sup>13</sup> Jesus used many stories, parables, metaphors, and dialogue rather than monologue to attract the attention of listeners and to find a way for his words to be accepted by his own people. Similarly, it is more important in preaching today to let the truth be heard than to preach it. Therefore, the party that is more important in preaching is the ultimate receiver of the message, the congregation, not the preacher. They are the ones about whom Dr. Kim talks throughout his work.

Even though Dr. Kim's search for a new preaching style for the transitional Korean Church has valuable points that we need to consider, his work has two weaknesses. First, there are many arguments in his work which have no evidence. For example, he argues that under Japanese colonialism "situational preaching came out...for the first time in Korea."<sup>14</sup> But, Dr. Kim presents no evidence proving that previous Korean preaching was not situational preaching. Preaching by its nature cannot exclude the situation of the listener, one of the crucial ingredients of preaching.<sup>15</sup> The preaching of missionaries and early Korean preachers were situational, since they often asked new converts to stop the ancestor worship which was at the heart of their culture

and life.<sup>16</sup> If this preaching had not been situational, there would have been neither conversion nor change in the lives of the congregations. Furthermore, Dr. Kim argues that President Rhee's regime was defeated by the student revolution because of its political corruption and the irrelevant messages by the preachers of his time.<sup>17</sup> However, Dr. Kim does not present any evidence for this argument. Moreover, his argument is illogical in and of itself, because if the preachers' messages had been a serious problem provoking the student revolution, the Church should also have been overturned with President Rhee's retirement. Dr. Kim also makes a mistake when he talks about the function of the Bible in human history. He says: "As a matter of fact, the Bible is the source of much of our civilization. Politics, literature, art, and science cannot be understood without it."<sup>18</sup> Despite his bold argument, he does not support this assertion with any evidence. Therefore, it is not an argument, but a statement of faith, weakening the solidity of his dissertation.

Second, Dr. Kim often makes the Word the *word* by making the authority of the Word conditional. In his discussion of the preacher's authority, Dr. Kim says: "The preachers' authority comes from how they live not from what they say."<sup>19</sup> In other words, the authority of the word of preachers is conditional: when their lives match their words, their preaching has authority; when their lives do not match their words, their preaching has no authority. Of course, there is some truth in his argument. Preachers' deeds, not their words, should shine the light of Jesus Christ (Matthew 5:16). However, if a preacher's authority comes from how he or she lives, the authority of his or her preaching comes from the preacher, not from God. Then, the preached word is no longer the Word of God, but merely the word of humans.

The same mistake happens when Dr. Kim talks about the necessity of a good relationship between preachers and the laity, especially elders. He says: "When the relationship between them is good, the pastor's preaching carries more authority... Authority comes from relationship."<sup>20</sup> The degree of the acceptance of preaching is conditional. It is determined by the relationship between the preacher and the congregation. But the truth is that the authority of preaching is neither conditional nor determined by human relationships, because the preached word is the Word of God, not the word of humans.

Despite the weaknesses identified above, we can draw from Dr. Kim's work practical implications that can enlarge our views about preaching. First, preachers and congregations are partners on the journey of preaching. The authority of preaching only comes from the Word of God, and not from the preacher or from human relationships. The preacher is the one who has traveled to the world of the text with baggage, the issues and context of the congregation. Even when the preacher comes back from the land of the text, what he or she does is not simply report what he or she saw there in a monologue. Rather, what the preacher does in the sermon is to take the congregation there, so that they can find what the preacher found.

As Dr. Kim's description of transformative preaching shows us, in order to transform the hearts and lives of listeners, preachers should lead them to experience the Gospel. The preacher can neither push nor persuade the congregation. To make the preaching their own reality, members of the congregation should go where the preacher went, see what the preacher saw, and touch what the preacher touched in the world of the text. Therefore, through preaching, the preacher leads the congregation to the world of the text in a non-authoritative, inductive, narrative, dialogical way, so that they can experience the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

However, the preacher is not simply a guide who knows everything and has nothing to gain in the world of the text. Rather, the preacher is a partner on the journey with the congregation. In fact, the preacher gets the greatest benefit of preaching, because, as Fred B. Craddock states, "important places in the mind need not only to be visited but revisited."<sup>21</sup> In the same way, the more frequently we have the Lord's Supper, the more we realize the mystery of the body and blood of Jesus Christ. The more we understand the depth of the text by preaching and listening, the more we experience the transformative power of the text in our lives.

Second, what preaching ultimately seeks is neither acceptance nor understanding but the experiencing of the Gospel. Traditional Korean preaching ultimately has sought to get the congregation to accept the truth of the Gospel by understanding the message in a deductive way. But, the serious mistake that can occur in this process is that real acceptance and understanding do not happen. The knowledge which is imparted by this kind of preaching can remain on the listeners' heads rather than in their hearts to bring about the transformation of their lives. Understanding a concept presupposes the acceptance of the concept by faith, as Augustine once said "I believe in order to understand." But, what presupposes acceptance by faith? What allows

one to accept the Gospel of Jesus Christ before understanding it? It is experience. Through experience, humans know, understand, and accept knowledge. Knowledge gained by experience is almost never lost; instead it changes one's life, because it touches one's heart. Therefore, in order to transform the hearts and lives of the people, the Gospel should not just be known and accepted but experienced. That is the purpose of preaching.

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<sup>1</sup> Tae Kyung Kim, *Transformative Preaching in the Transitioning Korean American Church*, 11.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 18.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 43.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 65.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 87.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 109.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 119-121.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 124.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 139.

<sup>10</sup> Thomas G. Long, *The Witness of Preaching* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005), 15-16.

<sup>11</sup> For example, Eun Chul Kim's doctoral dissertation, *Preaching in the Korean Protestant Church (1884-1945): A Study in Light of John Calvin's Understanding of Word and Sacrament*, and Woon Joo Baek's Doctoral dissertation, *Canonical Criticism as a Tool for Enhancing Preaching in the Korean Church*, barely deals with the congregation. Eun Chul Kim, *Preaching in the Korean Protestant Church (1884-1945): A Study in Light of John Calvin's Understanding of Word and Sacrament*. Unpublished Doctoral Dissertation. New Jersey, Madison, Drew University, 2001. Woon Joo Baek, *Canonical Criticism as a Tool for Enhancing Preaching in the Korean Church*. Unpublished Doctoral Dissertation. California, Claremont, Claremont School of Theology, 1997.

<sup>12</sup> "How experiences are communicated is a major factor in defining what those experiences are." Fred B. Craddock, *Overhearing the Gospel* (St. Louis, Missouri: Chalice Press, 2002), 10.

<sup>13</sup> Tae Kyung Kim, *Transformative Preaching in the Transitioning Korean American Church*, 124.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 37.

<sup>15</sup> The congregation, which Thomas G. Long upholds as the first ingredient of preaching, ultimately means the *world* and *worship*: "the fact that the event of preaching involves a congregation, a gathering, already implies two other realities, namely the *world* from which the congregation is called out and to which the congregation will be eventually be sent, and *worship*, the reason for which the congregation is gathered." Thomas G. Long, *The Witness of Preaching*, 15-16.

<sup>16</sup> "For Koreans, at that time, converting to Christianity was a major challenge, and led to virtual isolation from the community. One had to stop ancestor worship, to oppose all shaman gods..." Eun Chul Kim, *Preaching in the Korean Protestant Church (1884-1945): A Study in Light of John Calvin's Understanding of Word and Sacrament*, 36.

<sup>17</sup> Tae Kyung Kim, *Transformative Preaching in the Transitioning Korean American Church*, 40.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 94.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 109.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 111.

<sup>21</sup> Fred B. Craddock, *As One Without Authority* (Chalice Press: St. Louis, Missouri, 2001), vii.