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**Twelve Influential Early
Korean Preachers**

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Twelve Influential Early Korean Preachers

Editor and Publisher

Paul Junggap Huh, Ph. D.
Columbia Theological Seminary
Decatur, Georgia

Co-Editor

Daniel Adams, Ph.D.
St. Johns, Florida

For any questions, subscription, and
articles please contact:

Tel. 404-687-4538

E-mail: huhp@ctsnet.edu

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COLUMBIA THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

Korean American Ministries
701 S. Columbia Dr.
P.O. Box 520
Decatur, Georgia 30031
www.webkam.org

Simeon Yi, Yong-Do (1901 – 1933)

John SongYin Paik¹

Speechlessness, humility, prayer, obedience

Let us make this our motto and not forget it.

The reason I have made 'Speechlessness' (是無言, Simueon) my nickname is to express that speechlessness is right and because I am like Simeon, who waited all his life in the temple for the Messiah and rejoiced when he finally met him.²

Introduction

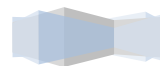
Living in a time with no certainty and with his poor health that did not guarantee a tomorrow allowed Yi Yong-do's to channel his enthusiasm into a less settling way of life and theology of lament. This led him to an intense prayer life, a search for a more powerful spiritual experience, and preaching eschatological messages to those undergoing individual crises and the crisis of the Korean nation. This enabled Yong-do to focus all his pain and suffering into tears of repentance and even gratefulness to God, and transcending all the despair into a new hope and new life of an uncertain time and era. As a result his own spiritual mystical experiences, love for Jesus Christ and those who were suffering, and his own practices of how to live a life as followers of Jesus has been transferred to those who listened to his sermons and joined his revival meetings.

A Time of Despair and Nihilism

During the Russo-Japanese War in 1906, Japan initiated its occupancy in Korea claiming itself as protector of the peninsula and took over Korea's diplomatic rights as well. After years of oppression and persecution, the Korean people finally responded in a non-violent movement demanding for independence on March 1st 1919, the so called, 3.1 Movement. A huge portion of the movement consisted of young students who were yearning for their freedom and independence from the dominating occupancy of the Japanese colonialism. However, the demonstration did not succeed resulting in the death of many protestors, the persecution of others, and the imprisonment and torture of still others. This failure brought great despair to the Korean

¹ John SongYin Paik is a M.Div. candidate at Columbia Theological Seminary. barber8351@gmail.com

² KIATS ed., "Yi, Yong-Do: Essential Writings" (Korean Christian Leader Series, 2009), 93.



people eliminating any hope left. Moreover, the Japanese colonial policy, which mainly was exploiting the land and properties of the Koreans, led them into severe poverty. This left them with no more meaning for life under the cruel coercion and the society was morally decayed producing problems like alcoholism, STDs, opium addiction and so on.³ It was right in the middle of this tragic era that Yi, Yong-Do was called to speak the gospel to his nation and its people.

Life of Suffering

In April 6, 1901, Yi, Yong-Do was born as the third son in an average family. Despite his weak physique and emotional character, he was talented in speaking in public. His parents, on the other hand, did not have a healthy relationship. Yong-do's father who was a heavy drinker and his mother, who was a Christian, always argued about her being a Christian and going to church. Young Yong-do grew up watching his mother being mistreated and oppressed by his father because of her faith.⁴

When the 3.1 Movement occurred, Yong-do, who was a nineteen-year old student, joined the movement and was imprisoned for two months. A year later he was arrested again for being involved in a demonstration and spent six months in jail. And a year after that, he was put in prison for two years for being involved in the independence movement. His love for his country and his lack of patience when facing injustice caused him three years in prison with its accompanying persecution and torture. Coming back to school, his school principal, A. W. Wasson who saw Yong-do's passion for his country and leadership, recommended him to go to seminary and become a pastor.⁵ He became one of the most impactful revival ministers in Korean history, however, was only able to speak the word of God for five years. He died when he was 33 years old.

Mystical Experiences

While in school, he was suffering from a lung disease and had to take a break from seminary. During this time with two of his seminary friends Lee Ho-bin, and Lee Hwan-shin, Yong-do led revival meetings at two churches in a small town. After fervently praying and singing hymns, Yong-do went up to the pulpit to preach. Then, suddenly he saw a vision of Christ on the Cross close up to him. He started crying because of this impressive and heart touching experience. And those who were witnessing Yong-do were touched and also started crying with God's as well. After this mystical incident, Yong-do recovered from his illness and committed himself to devote his life to the Lord.

³ Sang-Hyeon Cho, "Research on the Mysticism of Yi, Yong-Do," MA Thesis, Mok-won University, 2009, 10.

⁴ Joo-duk Kim, "The Theology of Mission for Church Renewal by Lee, Yong-do," *Theology of Mission*, Vol.19 No, 2008, 191.

⁵ Cho, 14.

Returning to seminary with his health recovered, Yong-do was filled with confidence. He graduated successfully, and in January 1928, he was dispatched to a local church in Tongchon, Gang Won-do providence. At the beginning, however, his ministry was not going well. Because his sermons were intellectual and theological, the members of the church who were not well educated had difficulty understanding them and being touched. This made him very disappointed, so he went up to a mountain and prayed for ten days without any food or water, and this made him into a different person. He would always be praying, evangelizing, visiting homes, taking the ill to hospitals, and bring home those who were beggars. On Christmas Eve in 1928, in the middle of a vehement prayer, Yong-do encountered an evil spirit or demon. He prayed and fought with the demon all night long, and finally defeated it and it left the area. When he came back, windows were broken, walls were smashed, and there was blood on his hands and his clothes. And after this second mystical incident, his prayer, sermons, and ministry became more and more solidified.⁶

The next day, December 25th of 1928, the members of the church were filled with the Holy Spirit through Yon-do's sermon, feeling the presence of the Spirit, they started to repent if their sins, and since then the church began to grow rapidly. In 1930 Yong-do finally became ordained as a Methodist pastor.

Revival, Repent, Reform

The transformation of Yong-do brought a revival in the churches in the Tong-cheon area. The churches were filled and people started to recognize his name. And after the revival meeting at Pyeong-Yang (the current capital of North Korea) Central Church, Yong-do's popularity began to grow rapidly. From 1931 to 1933 he went to more than 100 churches leading numerous revival meetings in different areas, and different denominations. Everywhere he went, the churches were filled with people and there was weeping and wailing with tears flowing down their cheeks with repentance and confession. The following is a testimony of a witness who attended one of these meetings:

*Some of our friends gathered at my house and spent the whole night crying. Ever since, these people met at my home. ...Every night we would gather and pray, praise, cry, sometimes danced until two to three in the morning or sometimes even till sunrise.*⁷

The first thing he shouted at revival meetings and the content of revival itself to Yong-do was repentance. The revival meetings he led were filled with weeping and crying not only from the sorrows of the people and their tragic time, but of crying of repentance from sin.

⁶ Yoon-Kyu Kim, "A Study on Pastor Lee Yong-Do's Mystical-Enthusiastical 'Spiritual Formation' and 'Revival Movement,'" *Theology and Praxis*, 2009, 310-311.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 313.

The Joeson Church needs to experience revival. What the Korean Church does not have: prayer, evangelism by individuals, enthusiasm, love, courage, a heart of thanksgiving, praise, cooperation, Bible studies, a truth-seeking heart, community service, and family prayers.

*What it has: useless gossip, useless talkativeness, criticisms, a heart that seeks only money, laziness, argumentativeness, conflict, having no heart, fear, complaints, anxiety, worries, separation, harlequin-type entertainments, a heart that seeks to gain money, envy, selfishness, instability in families.”
February 9, 1927⁸*

To him, revival meant repentance, and that was the first thing that had to happen individually and in the churches of Korea. He goes on talking about revival;

When there is a revival:

First, even the vilest sinners that are filled in arrogance and evil intentions, even those that they declare that they know neither God nor their souls, even those that have become blinded by the riches of the world, will repent of their sins... there is enthusiasm, love, service, self-sacrifice, joy, satisfaction, and pleasure...there is a miracle... May 2, 1927⁹

According to Kim, Joo-duk, Yong-do’s call for revival and repentance was a call for reform of the Korean churches facing its darkest times. It was the revival of the church, and repentance of the church that he was eager to say through his revival meetings at the churches he visited. The reformation he was shouting to the Korean churches was not a systematic external reform but rather an internal reform initiated by the individual.¹⁰ He refuted the churches and Christians who were attempting to avoid the suffering of the Cross:

You churches of today that kill Jesus and only share the garments of him! You have threw away the blood of Jesus, the flesh of Jesus, and exult yourselves by merely taking the formalities, where is your foundation in your faith in Jesus? Today’s Christian demands a strange Jesus, and today’s pastor preaches a strange Jesus. When the real Jesus comes they will have to be slaughtered. They have murdered the real Jesus. They are promoting the devil as Jesus as asked by sin. Woe to the churches of today! The Jesus they

⁸ KIATS ed., “Yi, Yong-Do,” 107.

⁹ Ibid., 110.

¹⁰ Kim, 310-311.

*demand was a Jesus of flesh, of wealth, honor, while the real Jesus is Jesus of glory, of humbleness, of the poor; of the lowest... it is not to fit Jesus into your hearts but to fit yourselves to Jesus!*¹¹

However, the revivals did not leave merely positive impressions, especially to those who were serving churches in the area. The local churches and ministers were threatened since when Yong-do's time came to preach during a revival session the churches would be packed. However when it came time for the local ministers to preach the churches would not be filled at all. Also, local churches were afraid that they might lose church members or the members would anticipate a similar quality of preaching from the pastors such as Yong-do as had, which was mostly not the case. Furthermore, the shouts for repentance and reformation of churches were not pleasant to the ear in most churches nor to the ministers as well. In turn, the Pyeong-yang Annual Convention announced that he would no longer be invited as a revival speaker within the parish. The basis of their decision was that, "Yong-do is a liar, loves to be served, is a destructionist, brings disorder, and local pastors are poorly treated after his revival meetings. Therefore, we should not allow Yong-do entering our parish."¹²

Yong-do was also accused of being a heretic for associating with a shaman figure Lee, Yoo-shin, who was possessed with a spirit, and actually joined a shaman ritual, *Gangshin-goot*, and received a spirit. Yong-do also introduced Han Joon-myeong, who called himself the returned Christ, to others.¹³ In 1932, Yi, Yong-do was condemned as heretic by the Presbyterian General Assembly, which led to a committee meeting of the Methodist Church to consider Yong-do's resignation as a pastor. Nonetheless, Yong-do's revival meetings were held day after day, and wherever he went the church was overcrowded by those who wanted to listen to him preach, and his sermons touched more deeply the hearts of people with eagerness and passion.¹⁴

The fruits and revival as a result of Yong-do's sermons and meetings bear witness to the highly mystical characteristics in his ministry. While no longer using intellectual or complex vocabulary but still being able to communicate the Gospel, and at the same time having those at the meetings repent and be filled with the Spirit in a short matter of time is not to be seen as normal or ordinary. Then what was the source of Yong-do's mysticism as a revivalist? Cho suggests that the source of his mysticism lies in his prayer, tears, and Christology.

Theology of Lamentation: Prayer, Tears, Suffering

Prayer

When she was mistreated by her husband, it was her prayers that allowed her to undergo the hardships and struggles Yong-do's mother was facing, it was prayer that healed the lung disease

¹¹ Kim, 323.

¹² Cho, 24.

¹³ Kim, 330.

¹⁴ Cho, 26.



he was suffering from, enabling him to study at seminary, it was through prayer that he met Christ and was filled with the Holy Spirit, it was through prayer he defeated the evil spirit during the night long battle, and it was prayer that transformed everything in his life. Prayer was everything to him in his faith, ministry, and life.

*Prayer is my joy, my meaning, my life, my duty. Without prayer there is no joy for me, no existence for me, no life for me, and no good for me. Prayer is my life and my movement. It seems like there is no better work than prayer...*¹⁵

According to Cho, prayer to Yong-do was not simply pardoning to God but rather was a mystical and creative place where one's life was reborn. Yong-do called this the Exchange of Life.

*Whenever we enter into prayer, we must find our unrighteousness and give this to him as a price in order to earn the precious life of the Lord. Like that person who sits and waits for people to exchange money at the exchange booth, the Lord's spirit, namely, the Holy Spirit and the angels await us at the fate of the spiritual world; when we enter with our unrighteousness held in our hands, they welcome us and greet us with the abundance of life. We are moved by his love and grace that we shed warm tears and sing praises of gratefulness; because of his affectionate treatment, we are not even waiting of the night passing by, engaging in the deep communication what this and that words.*¹⁶

In a letter to his close friend, Yi Deok-Bong, he also gave practical instructions how to pray:

*First, you should pray every early morning (between 5 and 6 a.m.)
Second, you should pray in the woods or the field if at all possible
Third, you should pray first for your own holiness, your family, for the salvation of your people, and then the salvation of humankind. Afterwards, pray your own supplications.*¹⁷

Tears

As mentioned at the beginning, when Yong-do was little he was an emotional boy, moreover, he has lived a life of tears. His tears from his mother and family, tears of losing his country, tears of

¹⁵ Ibid., 29.

¹⁶ KIATS ed., "Yi, Yong-Do," 131.

¹⁷ Ibid., 106.

the suffering of the people, tears of his personal illness and sorrows. However, his tears did not remain as of pain and sorrow, but escalated into tears toward Jesus Christ, tears of awe, tears of gratefulness, and tears of grace. His tears enabled people to share their tears and cry out for God's mercy and grace, ask forgiveness, and give thanks. One day during a service, he wasn't able to speak because he lost his voice from crying out in prayer. This was written in his journal:

*I cannot speak. The word of God is not coming out of my mouth. My sermon is swirling in the center of me. It is tormenting me. I only cry for I cannot speak. These tears are my sermon. I lift my hands with all my strength for I cannot speak the words in my core. These hands I lift are my sermon.*¹⁸

Yong-do's tears were a more powerful communicating medium than rhetoric. The people who gathered at the church all had lost everything, their country, property, families, dignity, and hope. Who would not cry in this stage of their life and in history? Through Yong-do's tears, people were feeling Christ crying with them and comforting them at the same time.

Suffering

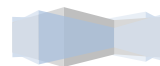
It is seen that Yong-do's life had a turning point at the end of the summer in 1929, seriously entering into mysticism. His faith journey and worldview before and after this point shows difference that is he no longer shows signs of trouble or instability he had shown before, at least appearing in his journals and other's writings. In his journal on August 23, 1929 he wrote:

*I who was wondering finally found my way... that way could be difficult to find, and easy to find at the same time, and I have wasted half of my life on the roads... the way is the way Jesus has walked. I am to simply trust and follow that way. Though others call me, "being behind times," or "outdated," or "stupid," I will none. Instead, I will consider those words as supreme glory, since it is persecution following the Lord. Till now, I have greatly lived a world of another. I was too afraid of the eyes of others. From now on, I am willing to be a 'Jesus-holic'. I will fanatically believe... It is unbearable to take compliments from the world for being smart while my life is lethargic... O, Lord, allow me to follow only you at any level you allow me to. Amen.*¹⁹

Such as Paul did, Yong-do was a Christ suffering mystic who chose the way to death as one who lives in Christ and for Christ. Participating in the sufferings of Jesus Christ was the essence of his faith, joining the life Jesus lived, accompanying the way to the Cross, and on the

¹⁸ Cho, 24.

¹⁹ Ibid., 31.



Cross. And this is why it was so important for him to follow and imitate the way of Jesus. In order to follow the way of Jesus he has made his motto based on the life Jesus has lived:

Suffering is my teacher: there is more to learn from suffering when it comes than when I am in comfort, and I am able to learn truth. Poverty is my beloved wife: Poverty does not leave me, as my beloved wife would not. I cannot but love pitiful poverty rather than proud wealth. Lowliness is my palace: I should not be situated somewhere up high, my mind should always humble itself and stay somewhere low. Hence lowliness always becomes the palace in which I live. It is a time when everything is resolved when one likes suffering, poverty, and lowliness.²⁰

Although, he was shouting for repentance and reform, at the bottom of his heart was the deep love of Jesus Christ he experienced and was eager to share with others. Even before his mystical experiences, he was an emotional child, who loved his mother, and loved his country, and his friends and so on. After his spiritual experience his love has focused to Jesus and the body of Christ, the church. And there are numerous stories of him taking care of the ill, poor, and young. His love for Jesus has spread to loving his neighbors as well. One reason, Yong-do was associated with the heretical figures introduced above was that he considered them, despite their beliefs and ways, to be also created in God's image and he believed that he did not have the right to rebuke them, while he understood their place being ostracized by the churches and denominations.

Yong-do had a mystical experience of uniting in Christ of love or unification of love. His goal was to experience the suffering Lord by himself and become one in a mystical, blood related fusion with Christ. He attempted to unite with Christ mentally by experiencing his pain. Therefore imitating Jesus' life was just a part of his many efforts in becoming like Christ. To him, other religious institutions and formalities were secondary, compared to meeting and experiencing Christ and having fellowship with the living divine through faith, love, and prayer.

Conclusion

Today there are various opinions and views on Yi, Yong-do, especially whether or not he was a heretic, a non-church destructionist, or a mystical egoist who lived in his own mind. Looking back, it is hard to agree with these views of criticism when we look at the results and fruits he has left for today's church. They are anything but heretical, where churches have grown unprecedentedly, and his love was never contained within himself. At the end of his short life, Yong-do was a founding member in establishing the Joseon-Jesus

²⁰ KIATS ed., "Yi-Yong-Do," 91.

Denomination, which has been heavily criticized for not being coherent with its emphasis on unity of the body of Christ. However, this is again hard to follow since he was not in any sense initiating the establishment, very ill, and to be fair he was almost banned to preach the word of God in both the Methodist and Presbyterian churches leaving him very few places to preach.

Living in a time with no certainty and with health that did not guarantee a tomorrow may have pushed his enthusiasm into a less settling way of life and theology of lament, leading him to pray more intensely as well as seeking for a more powerful experience, and sending eschatological messages. However, this actually enabled him to focus all his pain, and tears of suffering into tears of repentance and thanks to God, and transcend all the despair into a new hope and new life. Moreover, this experience, love, and life was transferred to those who listened to his sermons and joined his revival meetings.

Fighting for the freedom of his country, shouting the truth to the churches knowing that he will be disliked and disfavored, and living the most humble life not only as a pastor, but also as a human being, Yi, Yong-do must be a figure close to a saint, or a prophet. One of the most common sermons Yong-do would give was how to live as a true Christian, and introduce biblical characters as an example. He explained their virtues and how we should and could be like them. But there was no better sermon that he gave than by showing a life of those of the biblical forbearers himself.

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