Influence of the Clan upon Church Growth

In Korea

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"How many surnames are in this village?" This is often among the first questions asked by my Korean companion when we visit a village for the first time. This question used to puzzle me. What difference could it make which of the three hundred family names in Korea[1] were to be found here? Only after many years did I discover that this question was not based on idle curiosity. For the composition of family life or clan[2] relationships determines the pattern of community life, and often dictate the approach in Christian evangelism if a church is to be successfully planted and nourished.

If one is to understand Korea, he must know village life. Despite rapid urbanization, Korea still remains about 70% rural. Even the great cities are composed largely of country folks come to town, bringing their ways of living with them. Yet the village remains the most difficult of units for the Westerner to understand. Despite extensive experience in rural evangelism, this writer confesses enormous ignorance about the intricacies of social organization and individual behaviour in rural Korea.

While the whole range of this subject is valid for missionary study, the attempt here is to confine ourselves to the exam-

(1) Cornelius Osgood, "The Koreans and Their Culture," The Ronald Press Company, New York, 1951. p. 37.
(2) "A clan is a social unit composed of persons who trace their descent to a common ancestor, through connecting relatives who are all of the same sex." From: "Readings in Anthropology" Vol II, by Morton H. Fried; Thomas Y. Crowell Company, New York, 1959. p. 259.

ination of village family ties and their effect on church growth, in an attempt to answer such questions as: Why does a church start "with a bang" in some villages and apparently never "get off the ground" in others, although outwardly conditions appear much the same? Why do we see the well-nigh universal pattern of a country church which starts vigorously and then "levels off" with a moderate membership far short of what the population of the vicinity would lead us to expect? Why is it that when schism rends the Korean Church (as unfortunately is often the case) we have the spectacle of even the smallest churches likewise splitting, and in short order the emergence of <u>two</u> churches almost side by side in the village and each as large or larger than the original.

I am convinced that at least part of the answer lies in clan relationships, and that the initial question quoted in this paper is highly pertinent.(3) The Korean expression for "all people" is <u>Paek-sung</u>, or "one hundred surnames." Actually "for all of Korea there are 1,072 clans and 298 surnames."(4) Most common are Kim, Yi (or, Lee, Rhee), Pak, Chai. But not all with the name Kim belong to the same clan, and this is true of many other surnames. "There are, for example, 84 different Kim clans, such as Andong Kim, the Kimhae Kim, and so on."(4) Sometimes different Chinese characters

(3) "While no people lacks the family, many societies are without clans. ... Clans do not arise in very earliest stage of society, but on somewhat higher levels play their part for long periods, ultimately disappearing under a strong centralized government. ... Politically, then, the clan unites a much larger group than a family unit. On the other hand, it prevents national unity because the clan regards the interests of its members as paramount." From: Robert H. Lowie, "An Introduction to Cultural Anthropology," Rinehart & Co. Inc., New York, 1950. pp. 256-257.

(4) Osgood, Op. cit., p. 242.

are used for surnames pronounced the same way in spoken Korean (and spelled alike in the Korean phonetic representing the Chinese). Clans include rich and poor families. Their importance varies from place to place. They are usually strong in rural areas but lose integrative function in larger cities.

"In the technical sense, these clans...might properly be called sibs and the surname groups phratries. The patrilineal family system has operated independently of the class system to the present day."(5) The surname is passed from a father to his children and from generation to generation. When a woman marries she retains her family name, a practice causing considerable confusion among Westerners who must learn to call the wife of Mr. Kim by another name such as Mrs. Yang (rather than Mrs. Kim).

Pertinent to all this is the whole practice of ancestor worship which is not only the basic religion of old Korea, but also lies behind the universal importance of bearing a son. "Ancestor worship became widely inculcated among the people of the peninsula, over a thousand years ago, and however much a modern Korean may seem encrusted with other beliefs, hidden Confucian values will show beneath a scratch."(6)

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(5) Ibid, p. 242

(6) Ibid, p. 38. The following comments on ancestor worship were written about China, but are equally descriptive of Korea. "The cult group in this religion (ancestor worship) consists solely of persons related to one another by descent in one line from the same ancestor or ancestors... The rites in which the members of the group, and only they, participate have reference to their own ancestors, and normally they include the making of offerings or sacrifices to them." "Such rites include the making of offerings, usually of food and drink, and such offerings are sometimes interpreted as the sharing of a meal by the dead and the living. A. R.

Marriage is strictly exogamous, so that the bride and groom bear different surnames. The only apparent exception is where both have the same surname, but belong to different clans (actually not really an exception). Hence the couple rarely come from the same village. Since even today most marriages are "arranged" by third parties, one of the first factors to be determined is family and clan relationships. As the missionary travels from one village to another and watches his Korean assistant arrange suitable matches between Christian young people, he is both amused and amazed at the intricacies of a transaction so different from "popping the question" in the West.

The number of different surnames in a Korean village naturally varies widely. Osgood's study(7) of a small village of 27 houses revealed 12 name groups and 14 clans (those with the Li name were divided into 3 clans). But since the "Kyong-ju" Li occupy 10 of the 27 houses they clearly dominate the affairs of the village. Perhaps we Americans would understand this better if we could say

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Radcliffe-Brown, "Structure and Function in Primitive Society," The Free Press, Glencoe, Illinois, 1961, p. 164.
"The basis of ancestor worship was the assumption that the living can communicate directly with the dead and that the dead, though living in another realm, can influence and be influenced by events in this world.... Among the many duties of a faithful descendent, the primary duty was veneration of his ancestors' spirits. Most homes had a small chapel or shelf containing ancestral tablets, pieces of wood inscribed with the name, title, and sometimes birth and death dates, of an ancestor... On festivals, such as New Year's Day...a complete meal was offered. All offerings of food, rice, and wine were accompanied by the kowtowing which the parents and children performed according to seniority. Most ceremonies and offerings...took place in the home, but once every year (at the family cemetery." Chang-tu Ha, "China, Its People, Its Society, Its Culture, HRAF Press, New Haven, 1960. p. 111

(7) Osgood, Op. cit., p. 37

that 37% of the people in a certain town (or of the membership of a certain church) were not only Smiths but claimed to be related to one another. Osgood's study, though excellent, perhaps is open to the objection that the village is too small. This was perhaps necessary for the type of investigation he was pursuing. Though most villages are far larger, the pattern is very much the same. At this point we pause to comment a bit on Korean villages.

Seldom is an isolated farm house seen in Korea. Invariably rural Koreans prefer the companionship and security of a village where houses, as a rule, are built closely together without any detectable order or plan. Such clusters of houses may number all the way from a half dozen to as many as five hundred. Even in villages of several hundred houses, the pattern is the same ---simply one house after another connected by a maze of narrow pathways in which the missionary not infrequently is lost or trapped because of the "sameness" of village structure. There is no discernable difference between small and large villages except that the larger village may have a school, a police station, and possibly certain "town-ship" offices.

Although there may be a number of clans in the village, a few of them (sometimes only one) dominate its society. This is true in any society, of course, but the effect is more pronounced in Korea where land normally passes from father to son, and strong emphasis is laid upon ancestor worship. The strength of the clan in Korea may be beyond the actual holding of the same surname, in a series of other relationships involving blood kinship, economic ties, and various other loyalties.

The key to the problem we are examining in connection with church growth lies in whether one or more surname groups dominates the village either by numbers, land ownership, or prestige. Those ~~family~~ familiar with the "first families of Virginia" or the aristocracy of Charleston, S.C. haven't seen anything until they see their equivalent in a Korean village! When my Korean companion asks, "How many surnames in this village?" what he really means is, "Who is running the show around here?" and everybody knows this, although no one would be so rude as to put it in those terms. The answer is usually couched in such terms as, "Well, the largest number are the Lee family; Kobu Lees, that is."

The control of village life, though perhaps not legally defined by any kind of formal constitution, lies in the hands of the elders, usually representing the important clans. The missionary on his first visit is wise to present himself to these men and formally introduce himself. Mere conformance to this proper ceremonial code of respect may not win actual converts at the moment but goes a long way towards "winning friends and influencing people." He must remember that (as in many other matters in Korea) their custom is the exact reverse of our Western practice where newcomers receive the visit of local people first.

These venerable elders are often quite literally old men, blessed with many sons and innumerable other relatives, all of whom defer to his judgment and final say-so in important matters. He may own considerable land himself, or be a sort of "Ichabod" whose prestige lies only in the memory of better days long gone. Often these elders have a high estimate of their own opinions, and one is

careful about disagreeing with him on first acquaintance. Governments may come and go in Seoul, the young men of the village may do most of the work and legally or politically have the reigns of government, but not much happens without the old man's (or old men's) nod of approval. Especially is this true in the realm which here concerns us, i.e., the introduction of the new religion of the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

How do they get away with this? One must understand the deep ties of loyalty in Korean society, and the way such loyalties are built up by would-be leaders. Basic, of course, is the loyalty which the village head-man demands in his own family. He sternly insists on his rights for respect and obedience. He is the major link between the rising generation and the departed ancestors, the continuation of whose ideals and wishes he represents. Not only is he the one primarily responsible for maintining the worship of the ancestors, but very shortly he will be the one to be worshipped.

Further pressure may be economic. He can dictate who gets the use of family rice-lands or proceeds thereof, who will receive the advantages of education, who will get any available job opening or political appointment (a prize matter in job-short Korea), and so on. His voice is large in every matter from marriages to funerals. For the missionary this is highly important because his veto or nod of approval can determine a whole clan's acceptance of the Gospel. Heroic examples of those who have defied this system in order to accept Christ and join the church merely point up the fact that far more have deferred their commitment to Christ, or declined it altogether, due to the pressures of this system.(8)

This blind loyalty to a clan is often transfered to a political leader or party of faction in the government, in education, in business, in the church, and elsewhere. Clan loyalty may not be entirely to blame for the tendency of Korean society to fragment, but it certainly has its share. It often seems that all of Korean society from the kindergarten to the National Assembly is engrossed in the 24 hour a day passion to build up the position and influence of "my faction" against the "opposition." It often becomes axiomatic that "my leader can do no wrong." Principles are not what matters; position is paramount. Any means whatever are justified toward establishing this end, though, of course, the very same means on the part of the "opposition" are loudly condemned as being most reprehensible!

In the village context, this tug-of-war between factions which seems so characteristic of Korean society, often builds up around those men of strong character who emerge as leaders. This tension may be invisible to Western eyes but lies beneath the seeming uniformity of outward behaviour by the villagers. The elders may apparently be at peace, lolling together in the shade of a summer community pavillion, getting drunk at some ceremony, or puffing their pipes over a game of chess. But behind this facade, they are maneuvering for positions of advantage or political leverage by devious and indirect means. It is a game in which no one is ever 100% the victor, or ever accepts defeat. The battle ground, the issues, the leaders, the line-up may shift, but the struggle

(8) A sixteen year-old boy received as a catechumen in the spring of 1964, against his father's wishes, was so severely beaten each time he returned home from church, that he ran away from home. He acted entirely on "faith" for he had no prospect of a job or place to go. Because of family pressure, he could not continue at home.

goes on!

What does this mean to evangelism in such villages? The missionary comes prepared to preach the Gospel "to every creature" and to welcome all in the name of Christ regardless of position or class or faction. Of course the local intrigue and petty politics and clan rivalries mean nothing to him; is he not above such matters and equipped with the Gospel of salvation to every one who believes? How easy for the missionary to naively ignore these factors we have been discussing simply because he cannot see them. Nor can he adopt the Communist solution of executing leaders and otherwise forcibly breaking up old clan and community loyalties.

So what happens? Consider some hypothetical cases (though based on actual observations).

Village A. There is one predominant clan. Somehow when the Gospel is introduced into the village, the leader of the clan gives his approval, though he may not become a Christian himself. When the time comes to build a church he will see to it that a suitable plot of land (a scarce item in Korea) is made available. His relatives become leaders and officers in the church. So far so good.

If this clan exercises wisdom and charity and the other fruits of the Holy Spirit, other villagers not of that clan will become Christians and the Church will prosper.

But consider the possibilities for trouble. Because the predominant clan has "adopted" the church all others may refuse to have anything to do with it---not because they reject the Gospel as such, but because they do not want to associate with what ~~the~~ "old man Kim" controls. Furthermore, life may not be easy within

the little congregation. Suppose the Korean pastor (or missionary) unwittingly puts someone from a non-dominant clan into too prominent a position. The church will begin to rumble with factionalism. Suppose it seems advisable to "demote" or even discipline some member of the dominant clan whose conduct or character is harming the church; the head of the clan <u>though not a Christian</u> may exert pressures which almost invariably lead to trouble inside the congregation, or village opposition from without.(9)

<u>Village B</u>. In this situation, the church never wins approval from any village leaders, from the very start. Hence no "respectable" people will be found near it. Some of the very poor and uneducated come into the church because they are welcomed and given an opportunity for self-expression largely denied to them elsewhere. Widows, children, a few indigent men...these make up the congregation. There are no influential members, and no one with sufficient financial resources to even begin to make the church self-supporting.

This church is constantly vulnerable. Without leadership or financial resources the death or departure of even a few people virtually kills it. In the face of any rival movement, religious or otherwise, it is helpless. Decades pass and there is little or no visible growth. It remains dependent on outside aid for support.

(9) <u>Illustration</u>: The village church at Tai-gang is about ten years old. It has had a steady growth. The "lay evangelist" serving the church (as a pastor) is the grandson of a village head-man who is not a Christian. The latter sometimes calls on the missionary when he visits the village, but does not attend service. When selecting a site for a permanent church building, he not only "advised" on the best place but saw to it that it could be purchased. A sister of the evangelist is the leading deaconess. The church is respected and growing under this family sponsorship, but is vulnerable to the dangers listed.

Sometimes a new sect or denomination will enter, win the approval of the elders, and go off with a "boom" leaving the poor original church to wither on the vine.(10)

Village C. Here the village leaders are divided with respect to the church. Hence it seems as though invisible lines divide the village with respect to response to the Gospel. From certain homes will come new members, or the children will be allowed to attend Sunday School. But other homes, apparently just like these, will shun all advances from the church. The church will grow to a membership of about 50, with perhaps 75 children in the Sunday School, and stop there. Comparison of membership at five year intervals shows very little change from the number attending church only a year or so after it began.

Yet, a large part of the village continues to present a potentially large field of evangelism at the very doorstep of the church. Growth does not come in this congregation itself, but is evident only when it "colonizes" in a nearby village with a new church altogether. Thus we have the spectacle in most of rural Korea of literally thousands of small country churches with about 50 people attending, and relatively few large ones, even where evangelism has been carried on for fifty years or more.(11)

(10 Illustration: The Poong-san church began in 1955. The village was unusually old-fashioned (Confucian, strong ancestor worship, etc.) Village leaders never gave their approval to the church. For many years between four to eight old ladies composed the congregation. Only under leadership of evangelists sent in (and paid for) from the outside were there periodic times of revival. The church building is falling into ruin. The missionary's solution (if and when the old ladies consent!): Move church to another village about two miles away, where one man (a fairly respectable one at that) is now a Christian, and should be able to win many neighbors to Christ.

Village D. Leaders of the church here represent several clans in the village. Though not necessarily village chiefs, they are sufficiently respected locally to give the church prestige. Two or more of these men become deacons in the church. The pastor in charge later feels it is time to ordain an elder, in view of the size and maturity of the church. But he is told (in confidence) that it might be better to wait until the church is ready to ordain two men simultaneously. An experienced pastor or missionary recognizes this as a clue to an under-lying tension between two men or factions, of which he may not have been aware heretofore. When the time for election comes, sure enough, the two representing competing clans are elected.

Sometimes a church can continue indefinitely with a "balanced" leadership of two, sometimes many more leaders. But then comes a denominational schism (there have been two major divisions of the Presbyterian Assembly since 1954). Elder #1 will take the side of faction #1 in the denominational struggle. Automatically, Elder #2 takes the opposite side, not because of any identification

(11) Illustration: When work began at Too-sung-ni two years ago, we made a determined effort to win the leaders of the village. The village chief (an elected official) gave us every encouragement and loaned us a place of worship. But later we discovered that, although it appeared to be one village, actually it was two villages fused together, with different names for each section. Hence those in attendance, including about 100 Sunday School children, come from one village (the one from whom the village chief comes).

After about a year, this chief lost out politically, and a rival with backing from the other village division took over. His first act was to put pressure on the church to get out of the loaned building (we built another). Then, influenced by a younger brother who, as a university student had become interested in Roman Catholicism, he has offered to the Catholics not only the use of the same building, but also a chance to buy at a low price. Odds are heavily in

with the principles behind the schism, but only in reaction to the long standing tension, which in turn is rooted in personal and clan rivalry latent in all village life.

As these two leaders represent their own factions locally, there will be a polarization of other church officers and members (often with strong family ties) around the two, a whopping row will erupt, the two groups will pull apart and set up separate churches. Because latent tension has kept many people away from the church previously, the relaxed atmosphere and the tug of clan loyalties in each separate church induces sudden growth so that both are soon larger than the original. I have even seen a church building torn down, the materials divided, and each faction go off a hundred yards in each direction to erect its own building. In another place, such a division took place in 1954, then one of the resulting churches again divided in the schism of 1960, with the final result of three churches nearly side by side, where one good congregation might have been expected.(12)

It is easier to point out the characteristics of this problem than to recommend solutions. Experience, often gained the

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favor of the Catholic Church drawing most of its members from that village division the new chief represents. Result: Although there was no church of any kind in this place two years ago, a Protestant and a Catholic Church are now appearing side by side, with memberships drawn respectively from the two divisions of the village with their age-old antagonisms.

(12) Illustration: For many years there had been two elders in the church at Kal-gye-ri. Both were named Kim, but they belong to different clans. In the 1954 schism they split up. One of them had to build a new church, but within a year it was larger than the original, which also picked up membership. When both had reached about 50 in membership, they stopped growing, illustrative of the "peak" membership phenomenon so often observed in rural churches in Korea. I have seen more illustrations of the "Village D" type of situation than any other.

"hard" way, suggests the following, though they are by no means the final answer to the problem.

1. Get on good footing from the beginning with all local leaders, if possible. The formal greeting initially, care to avoid needlessly disturbing village life, asking permission of local leaders to purchase land or buildings according to custom...such courtesies may pave the way for years of cordial relationships.

2. From the start, insist on true faith rather than other motives as requirements for church membership. Through sad experience I have sometimes found that the first "eager" converts had the ulterior objective of gaining "position" in this new institution (the church) so as to out-rank or get even with rival leaders in the village. Only by insistance upon true faith in Christ and the refusal to vest anyone with the prestige of office until he has demonstrated true Christian living and maturity, can one hope for a oneness in Christ which can overcome personal rivalries.

3. Insist upon fairness and wide representation of all elements in the organization of the church. Korean church government calls for appointment by the pastor of temporary unordained deacons and deaconesses in new and immature churches. If he listens to one group rather than take the whole congregation into account he may wind up with a one-sided leadership. Perhaps this is the reason why it has been found expedient to have so many Korean Christians holding this office, i.e., simply create a lot of "chiefs" rather than give authority to a few. I once discovered, in a survey of over 200 Presbyterian Churches in North Chulla province

that approximately one-third of the baptized membership were unordained deacons.(13)

4. Attempt to capitalize on the "follow-the-leader" attitude by directing the loyalty of all members to the One True Head of the Church. Ultimately this is the solution to all church rivalries and factionalism everywhere (not just in Korea). Only in allegiance to Jesus Christ can the Kims and the Lees (to say nothing of the Smiths and the Browns) learn to bury their differences.

5. Much prayer and patience must be exercised by all involved. One cannot help but remember that even Jesus experienced the spectacle of the mother of two of His disciples requesting that they be given the two places of honor in His kingdom (in preference to the other ten). It is evidence of the power of His example and of His Spirit, that after the experience of washing His disciples' feet and of Pentecost, there is no record in the New Testament of rivalry for position or prestige or power among the original disciples, though there may have been such between their followers and thrugh there were at times strong differences of opinion. Prayer and patience as we wait for His Spirit to accomplish the same ends in Korean hearts in our time are the only solution.

(13) Illustration: At the Yang-ba-li church this spring, one of the two (male) deacons had to be dropped from his position for infraction of church rules and absenting himself from church. This would throw the politics of the church into imbalance. The other deacon, unusually magnamimous and peace-loving, suggested that he too would like to resign for a few years and recommended two young men who could be made deacons in their places. This was done, faces were saved, balance (and peace) maintained.