

Ethnic Celebrations and American Identity: The Centennial Celebration of the Korean American Churches

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For Korean Americans, the year 2003 was a centennial anniversary since the first Korean immigrants landed in Hawaii in 1903. Korean American communities celebrated the centennial year of their immigration in various events. These ethnic celebrations have served as stages where people share their group identity by weaving diverse factors together and where they establish their identity as Americans. In other words, commemorative events or festivals of particular ethnic groups serve as crucial places for participants to position themselves within American society.

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Considering their roles in identity formation, this paper makes a case study of the commemorative Centennial Celebration of the Korean American church which was held in LA on November, 2003. That celebration aimed at commemorating the centennial year of the foundation of the first Korean American Protestant church in 1903. It was a religious event based on Protestantism and took place predominantly in terms of the evangelical Christian vision of Korean Americans. Then, this celebration is a good example of how Protestant leaders promoted Korean American identity through a religious celebration. The Christian symbols and narratives used in this centennial event demonstrate the process to establish what it means to be Korean Americans within the Korean American community. Through this centennial event, Christian identity negotiated the conflicts between Korean ethnic backgrounds and the American national identity.

The studies of ethnic festivals and celebrations in ethnic identity formation are based on the perception that the meanings of ethnicity are constructed and change over time, depending on how identity has been created at specific historical moments, rather than that ethnicity is “something to be preserved or lost.” Based on this perception, ethnic identity is established through the process of identification at a particular moment and ethnic groups engage in the process determining who can belong to which group and on what terms by participating in these events.

I. Ethnic Celebration and American Identity

In the studies of ethnic identity formation, there is a body of literature which deals with festivals and commemorative events. Immigration historian John Bodnar made research on commemorative celebrations,

suggesting that they exemplify how “public memories” are constructed among the same ethnic groups, through the use of cultural symbols and rituals in celebrations. A public memory, according to Bodnar’s definition, means “a body of beliefs and ideas about the past that help a public or society understand both its past, present, and by implication, its future,”¹⁾ and he believes that it plays a critical role in promoting the common group identities. In his research, Bodnar took the case of the commemorative activities of Swedish Americans.²⁾ The first Swedish immigrants fled religious persecution in their homeland and settled in the prairie in Bishop Hill, Illinois, in the 1840s. Since then, the arrival of the first Swedish Americans in Bishop Hill has become a founding myth of Swedish Americans.

In each commemorative activity, the story of the Bishop Hill settlement was used to express their deep respect for their immigrant pioneer, “ordinary people who overcame difficult problems of geography, climate, and politics and as such were always an inspiration to ordinary people who struggled with life in the present.”³⁾ For instance, in the semi-centennial celebration in 1896, the Swedish Americans dedicated a monument to the first Swedish immigrants, and John Root, a Swedish American priest, called Bishop Hill “the Scandinavian Plymouth Rock”⁴⁾ in his address. Considering that Plymouth Rock is a symbolic place of the beginning of the country by the Puritans, Root’s comparison reveals his intention to idealize their immigrant history. Even after the ceremonies have become more

1) Bodnar, John. *Remaking America: Public Memory, Commemoration, and Patriotism in the Twentieth Century*. (Princeton, NJ : Princeton University Press. 1992), p. 15.

2) Bodnar illustrated the commemorative activities of four ethnic groups between the late nineteenth century and the early twentieth century: Swedes, Norwegian, Mennonites and Irish.

3) *Ibid.* p. 44.

4) *Ibid.* p. 46.

entertainment-oriented from religious ones, Swedish Americans continued to include events of honoring the first-generation pioneers. Therefore, Bodnar's illustration of Swedish American ethnic celebrations shows that ethnic groups used the story of the first immigrants in their ethnic celebrations as a way to construct their "public memories," which would contribute to the construction of ethnic group identity.

Historian of religion Robert Orsi also focuses on the significance of ethnic festivals as a way to see the process by which ethnic Americans are building their identity. In his book, *The Madonna of 115th Street: Faith and Community in Italian Harlem, 1880-1950* (1985), Orsi made research on the annual festival of the Madonna of Mount Carmel on East 115th Street in New York City, an Italian American Catholic celebration. In this study, Orsi tried to reveal the Italian immigrants' perceptions, values, and needs implied in their religious practices and attitudes.⁵⁾ According to Orsi, in ethnic celebrations, participants "revealed to themselves and to others who they were"⁶⁾ and their common identities are constructed in this process. In addition, Orsi argued that ethnic celebration became the place for the immigrant generation to introduce their children to "their most fundamental perceptions of reality," and to deal with the problems they have as immigrants in strange land based their common and unique value systems.⁷⁾

Both Bodnar and Orsi focused on the functions of ethnic celebration in

5) He called this aspect of religious studies as "a study of popular religion," defining the meaning of popular religion as "religion in the first sense, the rituals, symbols, prayers, and practices of the celebration, is unintelligible apart from religion in the second sense, as the people's deepest values and perceptions of reality"

Orsi, Robert A. *The Madonna of 115th Street: Faith and Community in Italian Harlem, 1880-1950*. (New Haven, CT: Yale UP. 1985), p. xviii.

6) *Ibid.* p. xviii.

7) *Ibid.*

creating “public memory” based on unique histories and experience of each ethnic group. In both cases, immigrants used their ethnic celebrations for publicizing their “unique” histories and experiences not only to themselves but also to others.

Historian April Schultz more dealt with interaction of these ethnic festivals with the changing American social contexts. Schultz studied a four day Norse–American Immigration Centennial Celebration in her article, “The Pride of the Race Had Been Touched?: The 1925 Norse–American Immigration Centennial and Ethnic Identity.” (1991) The Celebration was held in the year after World War I in Minneapolis for commemorating the landing of the first immigrants from Norway in 1825. Schultz examined the significance of this Centennial Celebration in the context of the “Americanization” movement after World War I. Schultz analyzed how the Norse American community experienced the process of ethnic identity creation by responding to wartime nativism and post–war Americanization movements. In the Centennial events, Norse Americans employed a complex use of ethnic rituals and symbols and promoted resurgence of restriction movements among Norse Americans. Schultz emphasized the contribution of Centennial Celebrations in this ethnic identity formation process, saying that the 1925 Norse American Centennial Celebration embodied “all the tensions in the community over Americanization”⁸⁾ and that it served as a “strategic site” to show the creativity of ethnic identity as Norse Americans.

Religious scholar Madeline Duntley, furthermore, took a case of non–European Americans. In her research, Duntley examined the 85th anniversary celebration of the Japanese ethnic Presbyterian church (JPC) on June 6, 1992.⁹⁾ Duntley said that JPC tried to establish the Christian

8) Schultz, April. "The Pride of the Race Had Been Touched?: The 1925 Norse–American Immigration Centennial and Ethnic Identity." *The Journal of American History*, Vol. 77, No. 4 (Mar.1991): 1265–1295. p. 1276.

heritage of Japanese American history by merging the Japanese American past with Biblical stories in the commemorative religious rituals and to promote their ethnic identity in terms of Christian faith rather than ethnic ties. According to Duntley, a ritual such as a commemorative service is an example of how an ethnic community “understand(s) its past, and why it repeatedly enacts or performs it: as a blueprint for guiding its current mission outreach priorities and as a way of promoting community while preserving the generational, spiritual, ethnic, and linguistic diversity within its ranks.”¹⁰⁾

Based on the components of the scholarly efforts discussed above, the following section will examine the Centennial Celebration of Korean American Protestant Churches as a way to present the process of ethnic identity formation. I am concerned with the religious meanings that church leaders have produced within Korean immigrant churches, focusing on messages, sermons, prospectus papers, and letters, by church leaders and community leaders, as well as photos displayed during the Centennial Celebration. Through the Centennial Celebration, Korean American Christians have tried to make legitimate biblical settings for and religious explanations of Korean national history and immigrant experiences through this celebration. These religious discourses showed the process of the establishment of Korean ethnic solidarity in terms of Christianity.

9) Duntley, Madeline. "Heritage, Ritual, and Translation; Seattle's Japanese Presbyterian Church." Orsi, Robert A. ed. *Gods of the City : Religion and the American Urban Landscape*. (Bloomington, IN: Indiana UP. 1999): 289–309.

10) *Ibid.* p.302.

II. The Centennial Celebration of Korean American Protestant Churches

A. Planning and Organization

The Christian Herald USA, one of the Korean American Christian weekly newspapers, headquartered in Los Angeles, initiated the idea of the centennial event on February of 2003. As the first step to put this idea into reality, Myeong-Kyun Kim, chairperson of *The Christian Herald USA*, advertised the purpose of this centennial celebration, by writing letters to church leaders and political dignitaries in and outside the United States:

The year of 2003 is a very historic one not only for 2 million Korean-Americans but also for 70 million Koreans.¹¹⁾ The first group of immigrants from the Korean peninsula reached the Hawaiian Islands on January 13, 1903 and during the same year, the first Korean American churches were founded in San Francisco and Honolulu.¹²⁾

After publicly initiating the plan of this centennial celebration, *The Christian Herald USA* led the selection of committee with the active support of The Council of Churches in Southern California, an ecumenical Korean American Protestant organization in Los Angeles. These two promoters headed the centennial organizing committees made up of church

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- 11) "70 million Koreans" in this letter included the population of both North Korea and South Korea. By calculating the total number of all Koreans, he used 'Korean' as a term of ethnicity which meant more than a term of nationality.
- 12) Kim, Myeong-Kyun, Invitation Letter. Proposal Papers of The Centennial Celebration of the Korean American church. *The Christian Today USA*, Fed. 21. 2003.

leaders and hundreds of volunteers from religious organizations in Southern California, such as The Council of Christian Churches in Southern California, The Association of Pastors in Southern California, and The Association of Elders in Southern California.

The organizing committees elicited financial support from Korean American businesses in the Los Angeles area. This support came from the sponsors which were running their businesses depending on the maintenance of Korean American communities: newspapers such as *The Korea Times (Hankuk Ilbo USA)* and *Korea Central Daily (Joongang USA)*, and Korean language broadcasting companies on air in the cities with the large Korean American communities such as Gospel Broadcasting Co. of America, Radio Korea, Radio Seoul, KTAN, Korean Television Enterprise (KTE), Christian TV, and The Christian Broadcasting Co. of America. Another main sponsor of this Centennial Celebration was voluntary non-profit interdenominational Christian organizations. They expected the events to be the impetus to revitalize Christianity both in America and Korea. They included The National Council of Churches in Korea, Korea National Prayer Breakfast, The World Holy Spirit Movement Associations, Inc., The World Holy Spirit Evangelization Crusade, The Christian Council of Korea and The National Unification and Evangelization Associations.

Based on this financial and spiritual support from various sources in and outside the United States, the organizing committees elected Rev. Dong-Sun Lim, a pastor emeritus of the *Oriental Mission church* in Los Angeles as chair. Under the leadership of Rev. Lim, the planners agreed upon the official objectives of this centennial celebration. They abstracted their objectives into four slogans of this Centennial Celebration which were Honor, Reconcile, Celebrate, and Bless.¹³⁾ Based on these four slogans,

13) Honor meant the connection of the immigration history to their Korean pasts by honoring the Korean ancestors and immigrant pioneers. Reconcile represented both generational and interethnic reconciliation. Celebrate and

they made all the advertising materials such as Centennial posters and pamphlets. What each represents demonstrates the planners' intention to create ethnic memories as a way to establish group identity as ethnic Koreans and to project future visions as Korean Americans through evangelical Christian missions. In other words, because the celebration was not only an ethnic festival but also a Christian event, the symbols and narratives used in each section aimed to conflate Christian identity and Korean American ethnic identity.

B. Photo Displays

The centennial offered an opportunity to use the vernacular memory of the pioneer immigrants to reaffirm values that were crucial to the maintenance of ethnic institutions and communal life and to express pride in the achievements of ancestors.¹⁴⁾

During the celebration, about five hundred photos were displayed in the lobby of the Los Angeles Convention Center.¹⁵⁾ Photos were chronologically displayed on hard boards with particular themes and explanations of each photo. Korean American Christian leaders stressed that the Protestant churches have been ethnic centers of Korean immigrants since the beginning of their immigrant history and the central roles of Christian churches within Korean immigrant communities become

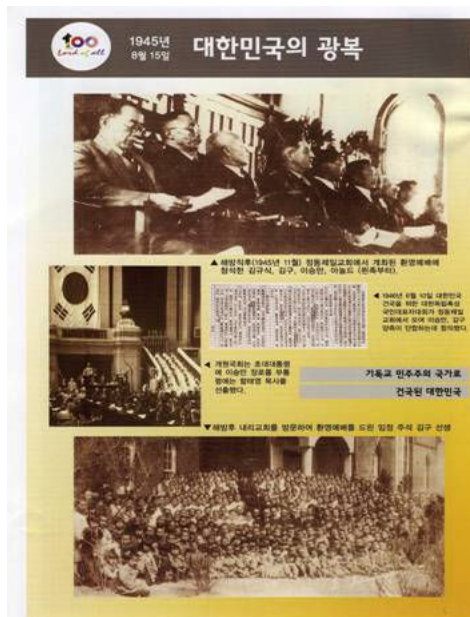
Bless stood for the visions for the rise of Korean American culture and identity by unifying Korean Americans in terms of Christian evangelical missions in America.

14) Bodnar, John. *Op. Cit.*, p. 61.

15) In 2006, *The Christian Herald USA* published the series: *Koreans in North America: A Pictorial History -Rainbow over the Pacific* which was composed of three volumes and included collections of photos displayed during the celebration.

There was an explanation beside the picture: “The Bible which made Syngman Rhee convert to Christianity.” Committees also added the comment about how much Rhee was actively involved in Christianity, saying “Syngman Rhee led Bible study groups even when he was in prison and evangelized over forty prisoners.” In this photo display of the foundation of South Korea, planners used Rhee as a symbolic figure establishing a close tie between modern Korean national history and Christianity.

In addition to the emphasis on the Christian background of the first Korean president, there are two more examples from photo collections illustrating how the Centennial planners tried to make a historical connection between Christianity and modern Korean history by emphasizing Christian engagement in the development of Korea.



< Figure 2 Korean Independence >

The photo on the top: Kyu-Shik Kim, Ku Kim, Syngman Rhee, and Arnold who attended welcoming services held in Jung Dong First Methodist Church in November of 1945, right after independence from Japan.

The photo in the middle: The first representative assembly elected the first president of the Republic of Korea, Elder Syngman Rhee and the first vice-president, Rev. Tai -Young Ham.

The photo on the bottom: Ku Kim, president of the Korean provisional government during Japanese occupation, attending welcoming services at Naeri Church after Korean independence.

Figure 2 is a picture board entitled, “Korean Independence,” which displayed photos of the establishment of the South Korean government in 1948. In this picture board, the subtitle in the middle explicitly connects Korean national history and Christianity: “The Republic of Korea established based on Christian Democracy.” “Christian Democracy” meant that South Korea was a Christian country, which was not true. In addition, the description of the photo in the middle used the titles used for Christian leaders in a Presbyterian Protestant Church, such as *Moksa* (Reverend) and *Jangno* (Elder) to address political leaders including president and vice president.

In addition, this collection included the pictures of the worship services which Korean political leaders in the first government attended. Under the strong influence of America in the establishment of democratic government in South Korea, early Korean early political leaders had American backgrounds which were closely connected to Christianity. Nevertheless, “Christian democracy” is a false term used for overemphasizing Christian influence on Korean history.

Among the picture boards, there were ten boards displayed under the title of “The pioneers of Korean American History.” These boards primarily included Korean Christian intellectuals in America who had sponsored Korean independence. Interestingly, the photos of American missionaries in Korea were selected under this title. The picture boards

displayed the photos of American missionaries such as Henry. G. Appenzeller and Horace G. Underwood as pioneers of Korean immigrant history, (Figure 3) even though they worked primarily in Korea during the early twentieth century. Therefore, these photos emphasized the American legacy of Korean American immigration, connecting between American missionaries and the development of Korean American churches.

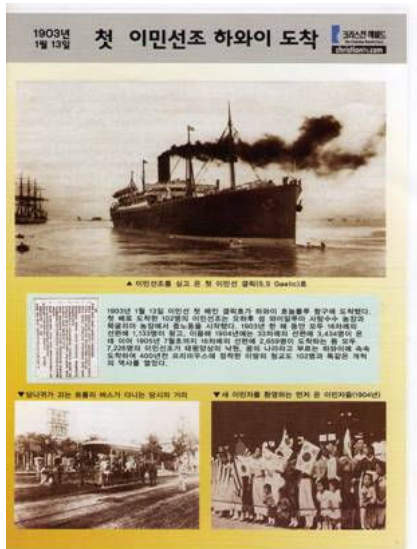


<Figure 3: The pioneers of Korean American History >

- Top Right: Rev. Underwood
- Top Left: Rev. Underwood's House
- Middle Left: Rev. Underwood's Summer House
- Bottom Left: Rev. Underwood.

These photo collections show that immigrant church leaders trace the beginning of Korean immigration to the American missionaries in Korea. As Christianity provided the common ground between Korean national history and Korean immigration, Centennial organizers tried a connection of their immigrant history to America as well.

Furthermore, as one of the rhetorical strategies to construct the American national identity based on Korean ethnic background, an analogy between the Korean Americans and the American Puritans was used. One of the major photo collection boards about the first arrival of Korean immigrants in Hawaii illustrated this purpose. (Figure 4)



<Figure 4: The First Arrival of Korean Immigrants in Hawaii >

There were four pictures displayed on this board. The photo on the top was the *SS Gaelic*, which was the first ship of Korean immigrants. The *SS Gaelic*, that brought the first Korean Americans symbolized the inception of Korean American histories. The image of the ship *SS Gaelic* provides a source for making a parallel between Korean immigration and the Puritans who came to America on the *Mayflower*. The caption on this board explicitly shows this analogy.

The *SS Gaelic*, the first ship of Korean immigrants, arrived at Honolulu, Hawaii on January 13, 1903. The first 102 Korean immigrants started severe labors at Wailuku and Mokuleia sugar plant plantations in Oahu. In the same year, 1,113 Korean came to Hawaii on 16 ships and 3,434 more the next year, 1904, on 33 ships. By July of 1905, 7,226 Korean immigrant ancestors had arrived in Hawaii which they called as a paradise in the Pacific and a dream country. The total included 2,659 who came in 1905. They opened a new frontier history just like 101 Puritans in Plymouth four hundreds years ago.

With the parallel between the two groups, the ship in the photo brought up the images of "Puritans in Plymouth four hundreds year ago." The American Puritans in Plymouth were religious groups and lived centered on Christian churches. Therefore, in photo displays, the common Christian background was an agent to promote the American national identity of Korean Americans as descendents of American Puritans in the sense of the identical religious background.

C. Messages.

The organizers were not seeking to maintain the community's marginality but through ritual celebration, they were seeking to construct an ethnic identity that would place them at the very center of American culture.¹⁶⁾

The Centennial Celebration of Korean American churches aimed at declaring the central roles of Korean Americans in American societies in terms of their Christian evangelical missions. The promotion of American

16) Schultz, April. *Op., Cit.*, p.1281

identity was also presented in the messages, sermons and addresses spoken and written by Korean American religious leaders and celebrities during the celebration. For example, Rev. Jeong-Hyeon Oh, the former senior pastor of *Sarang Church*¹⁷⁾ in Anaheim, California, preached the significance of Korean American churches in world history as well as American society in his celebrating message:

I congratulate on the centennial year of Korean American churches which started with the first immigrants arriving in Hawaii 100 years ago. As a person who served in Korean American church for over twenty years, I have no doubt that Korean American church will take roles in leading world Evangelical missions.

As the descendents of European immigrants in America prevented the decline of Christianity in Europe which had started in the mid 20th century, five-million eight-hundred thousand Korean immigrants spreading throughout 178 countries in the world, are expected to take their roles in world missions in the 21st century. Furthermore, among Korean immigrant churches in the world, Korean American churches are playing central roles in the mission. I expect Korean American churches not only to challenge the Korean churches which tend to stagnate but also, through the burgeoning spiritual power, to influence American churches which are losing their powers.¹⁸⁾

Oh's message exemplified the narrative that Korean American should

17) Sarang Church has over 8,000 members ranking 49 in the fastest growing churches in America this year.

18) Rev. Jeong Hyeon Oh. *The Congratulatory Message*

take over world missions for the future as America has performed during the twentieth century. His messages analyzed that European immigrants came to America to keep their Christian faith and emphasized American active world missionary work in the twentieth century by these European Americans. Then, he said that Korean American Christians' roles for the next century, was to inherit the roles of European Americans in America, in terms of Christian evangelical mission. This also shows that organizers tried to place Korean Americans in a central position in American society through being Christians.

Another example of promoting American identity using Christian narratives is a sermon by Rev. Dong-Sun Lim during the Grand Festival. Rev. Lim gave his special sermon, *A Message for the Immigrants*. In the Bible story he cited, God's people of southern Judah was invaded by northern Babylonians resulting in many deaths and destruction. And the remainder were captured and lived in a foreign country. During the period of their captivity, the Israelites had to endure exploitation of hard physical labor and were weary in great distress. God sent a message of comfort and hope to the Israelites through the Prophet Jeremiah when they suffered from their lives as captives in a foreign land.

In his sermon, Lim applied the message of Jeremiah toward the Israelites to the present situations and future of Korean immigrants. Through his sermons, Lim implied that all Koreans are destined to immigrate to America and God has plans for Korean immigrants in America, a country founded by immigrants. Therefore, by providing a Biblical answer to how immigrants live in foreign lands, he believed that Korean Americans were to be models for other minority groups by their Christian religious faith.

He said, "In fact, this land, United States of America, is not the land of American Indians, nor of the whites, but of God. It is the land of dreamers

from all over the world. Today, there are over 400 different nationalities living across the United States.”¹⁹⁾ Therefore, he preached that Korean immigrants and descendents should love America as their home, by citing the Biblical scripture, “Build houses and settle down: plant gardens and eat what they produce”(Jeremiah 29:5) Lim said, that God commanded immigrants to love the land in which they live:

Being brought as captives and treated as second class citizens, they were forced to work and live like animals on the threshold of society. And because of their miserable circumstances, they had no love for the land: therefore they had no desire to build houses nor plant gardens nor trees. But at that very moment, God told them to love the land, to build houses, and to enjoy the fruit of their crops. As a human being, if you love where you live, that becomes your second homeland:

In this message, Lim stressed the loyalty to America by citing a Biblical story. To have American national identity is what God wants, according to Lim.

Furthermore, as one way of loving the land they live, he even encouraged interracial marriage. He suggested examples from the Bible and Korean respectable heroes including Rev. Kyung-Jik Han. Rev. Han was one of the most prestigious and respectable Presbyterian pastors in Korean Christian history.

The captive Israelites in Babylon did not want to marry the natives of that land. To them, the Babylonians were gentiles,

19) Commemorative Sermon by Rev. Dong Sun Lim. *A Message for the Immigrants*. On Nov. 9 2003.

one who served idols, and enemy of their homeland; 'how can we marry and establish relationship with them?' they said, and had largely ignored them. But God told them to marry them to be fruitful and to multiply through them. To most Israelites, it is common for them to marry their own people. However, there are cases such as Joseph's marriage to an Egyptian woman, Moses to a Medianite, Esther to a Persian, and Eunice, mother of Timothy, to a Greek.

In Korea, the son of Rev. Kyung-Jik Han had married an American woman, and the son of the coach Hyung-Gi Yoo had international marriage. Based on these instances, it is not shameful to have international or transnational marriage. And at the same time, I'm not advocating international marriages either. Koreans should marry within themselves but always open the option or possibility of marrying other nationalities if the need arises. And while international marriage can bring joy and satisfaction to the parties involved, more likely than not, they will have estranged relationship with their parents and relatives. Moreover, they open the possibility of losing their own national heritage.²⁰⁾

Lim concluded his sermon by suggesting the future mission as model immigrants here in America.

We ought to remember these words of God, and as we look towards next 100 years or 200 years anniversary, it is my hope and prayer that we may become the model immigrants to other people and pioneers to our future generations.

20) *Ibid.*

His sermon illustrated how Christian church leaders positioned Korean Americans within America. As long as they devoted their lives and vision to Christianity, they are chosen as a central race in every place, including America. In addition, Korean American roles are even more crucial because America has been the most powerful country in the past one hundred years, and America's missions for world evangelization will be inherited to Korean Americans, the most active participants in Christian churches.

Rev. Yong-Weon Lee from the *Hanbit* Holiness Church in New York also emphasized the significance of immigrant status of Korean Americans in his congratulating messages entitled *Hoping that the Last will be First*. According to Lee, Korean Americans came to America to repay American missionaries who came to Korea 130 years ago by restoring the early Puritan Christianity in America. The destiny of Korean Americans is to serve as a "guardian of American spirits" in the country where "Puritanism and Christian culture are withering."

Korean Protestant churches have achieved outstanding global growth since American missionaries introduced Protestantism to Koreans 130 years ago. Then, Korean immigrants brought their passionate Protestant faith to America where Puritanism and Christian culture are withering. Korean American churches are paying the gospel debts they have to American missionaries by serving a guardian of American spirits. They are also restoring what it means to be Americans in the traditional Puritan sense.²¹⁾

How is this possible? According to Lee, it is possible because "God's chosen people were immigrants" based on the Biblical stories, and the

21) Rev. Lee, Yong-Weon. "Hoping that the last will be first." *Christian Herald*, Oct. 30. p. 15

great people grow “outside their homelands.”

God chooses people He favors and trains them through trials and tribulations. There is no exception that God’s chosen people were immigrants who left their hometowns, relatives and their father’s houses. Abraham, Moses, Jacob, Joseph, David, the twelve disciples and Paul all left their homes and became God’s great people by depending only on God and keeping their faith in His promise despite loneliness and continuous suffering. Then, this fact in the Bible tells us that His great people grow outside their homelands, rather than within their homelands.²²⁾

Lee’s interpretation explicitly proclaims that immigrant experiences are the ways to obtain God’s favor.

In addition, Lee lifted up the status of Korean immigrants within American society. Lee’s message was based on the parable of Jesus about the workers of the vineyard in the New Testament.²³⁾ In this parable, the landowner was looking for workers in his vineyard all day long. He hired workers wandering the street and sent them to his vineyard. Some workers began to work from early in the morning and others from the afternoon. However, the landowner paid the same wages to everyone. Then, people who were hired first complained to the landowner for paying the same to those who were hired last. Then, he answered, “the last will be first and the first will be last.”

Lee paralleled the workers in the vineyard to immigrants in America. Korean immigrants were workers who were hired last based on their

22) *Ibid.*

23) Matthew 20:16. In the Bible, Matthew 20:1–16. there is Jesus’ parable of the workers in the vineyard.

shorter immigrant history relative to other ethnic groups.

We have shorter immigrant history than other ethnic groups. However, we are like workers who were hired in the evening. If we work hard and sincerely, we can expect great blessing and Grace that the last will be first as in the Bible: The landowner paid in turn from the last ones hired to the first ones. Through this Centennial Celebration, I hope we will have faith that people who can achieve Korean unification and world peace, as Joseph saved his family, are growing among us, Korean Americans.²⁴⁾

In the Bible, the implication of this parable is about the message of salvation through God's grace, not through human's efforts. However, Lee applied this parable in the contradictory way. Lee implied that if you work hard and sincerely, you will get God's grace and God will make you rise above the other groups. In addition, Lee's mentioning of Korean unification and world peace is out of place in this Korean American immigrants' centennial context. Lee just intended to highlight how important Korean Americans are within the global context, beyond their minority status in America.

In addition to the emphasis on immigrant generations, the celebration is projecting the future of the second generation Korean Americans. Korean Americans have hopes and dreams for the next generation who is fluent in English and more eligible to be "Americans" than their parents' generation. Korean immigrants came to America for their children in the first place and expected their children to be more accepted into American mainstream society. For that purpose, they sacrificed themselves to educate their children to get professional jobs and fulfill the dream of middle class lives

24) Rev. Lee, Yong-Weon. *Op. Cit.*

for which their parents had longed. The congratulating message of Rev. Sam-Hwan Kim is confirming that the dream of Korean immigrants is to be “Americans.” Even though it dose not happen in the immigrant generation, their expectation is still to be “a central group of mainstream American society.”

They grew up supported by the prayers with tears and love from their parents and the second and third generation will be competent enough to lead the next 100 years as a central group of mainstream American society based on their firm faith inherited from their parents.²⁵⁾

III. Conclusion.

In the centennial event, the expectation of Korean Americans’ contribution to America through their Christian fervor is the central concept of Korean American identity. These strategies point to the goal of ethnic celebration for the purpose of overcoming their marginal status and the insecure feeling by the disconnection both from Korea and America. This celebration praised an image of “model minority” in American society not based on economic success, but on being true Christians. Therefore, Korean Americans want to be more American than the previous Americans through their religious faith.

The appreciation of the past contribution of Korean immigrant churches to Korean history and the expectation of future roles of Korean Americans may bridge the differences not so much between Korea and America, as

25) Rev. Kim, Sam-Hwan. *The Congratulatory message*. Rev. Kim is the senior pastor of Seoul Myung-Sung Church.

between the immigrant generation and American born generations. In this identity formation process, Christian rhetoric and narrative have provided the legitimate frameworks for Korean Americans in the forms of sermons, performances, and exhibitions.

Therefore, in the Centennial celebration, the Protestant narratives of Korean American Protestant leaders constitute Korean American identity as God's Chosen people and this idea still maintains Korean national identities and at the same time, confirms their American national identity.

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Abstract

Ethnic Celebrations and American Identity: The Centennial
Celebration of the Korean American Churches

Soo-Young Lee

This paper is on the religious discourses of Korean American Protestant churches and their roles in forming Korean ethnic solidarity. The strong influence of immigrant Christian churches on Korean immigrant lives and communities has received attention from scholars in diverse disciplines. I am concerned with the religious meanings that church leaders have produced within Korean immigrant churches; for example, they have tried to make legitimate biblical settings for and religious explanations of Korean national history and immigrant experiences. These religious discourses have contributed to the establishment of Korean ethnic solidarity among Korean immigrant Christians and to the maintenance of Korean ethnic churches.

Pursuant to that goal, my paper made a case study of the commemorative Centennial Celebration of the Korean American church, which was held in LA in 2003.

Commemorative events or festivals serve as crucial places for participants to manifest and establish their public memories. Plans for this Centennial Celebration were initiated by church leaders and the *Christian Herald*, a leading Korean American Christian magazine in Los Angeles. Christian leaders in Los Angeles were motivated by a desire to assert consent from all the generations and denominations for maintaining Korean American ethnic churches. Based on these intentions, this event showed

how religious leaders and participants tried to build their common immigrant stories by honoring their church founders in Korea and in the United States. Especially photo collections displayed during the celebration aimed at tracing Korean American histories back to their mother country through religious commonality. Furthermore, messages delivered in the festivals mediated the immigrant generations and the American-born generations and illustrated how they projected the future of Korean Americans as the central minority in the United States rather than as a marginalized group by promoting “Korean Exceptionalism” based on their strong background of Christianity.

Key Words : Ethnic Celebration. Korean American. American Identity. Protestant Narrative. Religious Narratives
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