

The Protestant Awakening In Korea

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Introduction

The growth of Protestant Christianity in Korea from the late nineteenth century through the colonial period cannot be explained by a single missionary strategy, a simple rejection of traditional religion, or an automatic connection between Christianity and nationalism. Protestant missions arrived in a society undergoing political crisis, foreign pressure, institutional reform, and eventually Japanese colonization. Missionaries established churches, schools, hospitals, publishing networks, and voluntary associations, but Korean converts were not passive recipients of a Western religion. They translated, taught, organized congregations, funded institutions, and adapted Christian ideas to local concerns. Protestantism grew because religious teaching became connected to literacy, education, medicine, social mobility, associational life, and competing visions of Korea's future. Its relationship with nationalism was significant but uneven: some [Korean Christians](#) became prominent independence activists, while many foreign missionaries attempted to remain politically neutral or prioritized institutional survival. A careful historical analysis must therefore distinguish the pre-annexation period from formal Japanese colonial rule and examine how local agency, institutional methods, geopolitics, and religious conviction interacted.

Correcting the Chronology

The first resident Protestant missionary generally identified in the historical literature was Horace N. Allen, who arrived in Korea in 1884 as a physician connected with the American Presbyterian mission. Methodist and Presbyterian missionaries followed in the mid-1880s. This beginning occurred during the late Chosŏn period, not during the entire span from 1880 to 1920 as though it were one undifferentiated colonial era. Japan established a protectorate over Korea in 1905 and formally annexed the peninsula in 1910. The years before annexation involved Korean sovereignty under intense foreign pressure; the years from 1910 to 1945 constituted formal Japanese colonial rule. Separating these periods clarifies how Protestant institutions first developed and how their political meaning later changed.

Early mission work also developed within legal and diplomatic constraints. Missionaries often presented education and medicine as acceptable forms of service while formal evangelization remained politically sensitive. The royal court's reception of Western medicine after Allen treated a seriously wounded official helped create space for medical institutions. Mission schools later educated boys and girls in subjects that extended beyond religious instruction. These institutions did not operate outside imperial power relations: missionaries benefited from unequal international

arrangements and foreign protection, while Korean reformers sometimes viewed Western knowledge as a resource for national strengthening. The encounter therefore included cooperation, hierarchy, adaptation, and conflict.

Why Korea Differed from China and Japan

Comparisons with China and Japan are useful only when they avoid treating each country as culturally uniform. Protestant missions entered China earlier and Japan after the opening of treaty ports, yet conversion networks developed differently. Scholars Danielle Kane and Jung Mee Park argue that geopolitical networks and nationalist rituals help explain the contrast. In China and Japan, Christianity was often incorporated into public narratives of foreign intrusion in ways that could make conversion appear politically suspect. In Korea, geopolitical circumstances increasingly allowed Protestant identity to coexist with, and at times reinforce, nationalist aspirations (Kane and Park).

This did not mean that Koreans converted merely to oppose Japan. Many converts were drawn by religious conviction, biblical teaching, revival experiences, moral discipline, community, or access to education and health care. Nor was Christianity uniformly accepted. Confucian elites could object to egalitarian implications, Christian rejection of ancestral rites, and foreign missionary influence. Local conflict occurred, and missionary paternalism could provoke resistance. The difference was that Protestant networks became sufficiently rooted in Korean institutions and leadership that Christianity could be understood as more than a foreign presence.

Education, Literacy, and the Korean Language

Education was one of the most consequential channels of Protestant growth. Mission schools offered new curricula, trained teachers, and created opportunities for groups who had limited access to elite classical education. Schools for girls were especially important because they challenged restrictions on female education, even though missionary institutions themselves reflected the gender assumptions of their time. Graduates entered teaching, medicine, church work, journalism, and reform movements, extending Protestant networks beyond worship services.

The use of *han'gŭl*, the Korean phonetic script, also widened access to religious texts. Classical Chinese had long carried elite status, but translated Bibles, tracts, hymnals, and newspapers made reading material available to a broader population. Bible study encouraged literacy while literacy facilitated independent engagement with scripture. The spread of print did not simply Westernize Korean readers. Translation required choices about vocabulary, theology, social relations, and cultural concepts. Korean translators and colporteurs played indispensable roles in shaping the language through which Protestant ideas were understood.

Medicine, Social Service, and Institutional Trust

Hospitals and medical missions gave Protestant organizations a visible social function. Western medical practice did not replace Korean medicine, nor was every missionary treatment successful, but hospitals offered new forms of surgery, nursing, vaccination, and clinical training. Medical service could build trust across religious boundaries because patients encountered missionaries through practical care before entering a church. Institutions also trained Korean medical workers who later became professionals and leaders.

Social service should not be treated as a simple method for securing conversions. Patients and students had their own motives and could use mission institutions without accepting Protestant beliefs. Nevertheless, schools and hospitals created repeated contact, institutional credibility, and networks of employment. They also linked Korean communities to transnational flows of money, knowledge, personnel, and advocacy. These networks helped sustain organizations during political instability, although dependence on foreign funds could reinforce unequal authority between missionaries and Korean Christians.

The Nevius Method and Indigenous Church Organization

Presbyterian missions in Korea became associated with principles commonly called the Nevius method: self-support, self-government, self-propagation, systematic Bible study, and the use of local lay leadership. The method was never applied perfectly, and foreign missionaries retained substantial power. Still, its emphasis on locally funded congregations, itinerant evangelism, and trained Korean leaders encouraged organizational expansion without requiring a foreign missionary in every community (Oak; Paik).

Korean believers carried texts, established prayer groups, taught new members, and contributed money and labor to congregations. The Bible-class system created an intensive form of religious education that could be replicated in towns and rural districts. Revival movements, including the well-known Pyongyang revival of 1907, further strengthened confessional practice, repentance, prayer, and collective identity. These developments demonstrate why the history should not be narrated solely through prominent foreign missionaries. The scale of growth depended on Korean participation.

Class, Gender, and New Forms of Association

Protestant congregations offered forms of association that crossed some established social boundaries. Christian teaching about spiritual equality could appeal to people disadvantaged by hereditary status, gender hierarchy, or limited educational access. Churches created positions for lay

teachers, elders, deacons, Bible women, and youth leaders. Such roles provided recognition and networks that could support mobility. However, the church did not erase inequality. Missionaries and Korean elites often reproduced class and gender hierarchies, and women's leadership was frequently constrained despite women's central role in evangelism, education, and care work.

The attraction of Protestantism therefore lay partly in possibility rather than complete equality. Participation could offer literacy, disciplined community, mutual aid, and a language of personal worth. It also required behavioral expectations concerning alcohol, gambling, sexuality, family practices, and ancestral rites. These demands could create conflict within households. Conversion changed not only private belief but also social obligations and identity.

Japanese Colonial Rule and the Politics of Christianity

After annexation in 1910, colonial rule altered the position of Protestant institutions. The Japanese Government-General regulated education, association, publication, and religious activity. Mission schools faced requirements that could limit religious instruction and place them under colonial oversight. Foreign missionaries often defended institutional autonomy but were divided over political involvement. Some feared that association with Korean nationalism would endanger churches and schools; others criticized repression or documented abuses (Park).

Korean Christians were disproportionately visible in portions of the March First Movement of 1919, a nationwide campaign for independence. Sixteen of the thirty-three signatories of the Declaration of Independence were Christians, although Christians were only one part of a broad movement that also included Ch'öndogyo adherents, Buddhists, students, and many local participants. Churches and Christian networks helped circulate information and organize gatherings. Colonial arrests and violence then strengthened the association between Christianity and national suffering in some communities (Lee).

Timothy S. Lee cautions against reducing church growth to a straightforward patriotic alliance. Before 1919, missionaries' attempts to restrict political activity within churches could alienate nationalist figures. Some missionaries maintained an officially apolitical stance even when individual missionaries protested brutality. The March First Movement changed perceptions, but Protestantism remained internally diverse. Nationalist Christians, conservative church leaders, foreign mission boards, and colonial authorities pursued different priorities.

Nationalism, Transnational Faith, and Ambiguous

Power

Recent scholarship emphasizes that Korean Christians belonged simultaneously to local congregations, a Korean political community, and a transnational religious world. These memberships could reinforce or contradict one another. Christian universalism provided a language of human dignity and international solidarity, yet mission institutions were structured by racial, financial, and imperial inequalities. Missionaries could advocate for Korean welfare while assuming that Western leadership should dominate. Korean Christians could use transnational connections to publicize colonial violence while also challenging missionary control.

This ambiguity is central to understanding Protestantism's durability. The religion was neither merely an instrument of Western imperialism nor simply a vehicle of national liberation. It created institutions and identities through which Koreans negotiated modernity, colonial power, family change, education, and political responsibility. Different communities emphasized different elements at different times.

Research Approach and Source Limitations

A strong study of the Protestant awakening should combine mission reports, Korean church records, newspapers, school and hospital documents, colonial regulations, memoirs, and later scholarship. Missionary reports are valuable but often measured success through baptisms, attendance, donations, or institutions and may exaggerate progress to satisfy supporters. Colonial documents can reveal regulation and surveillance but reflect the assumptions of the occupying state. Later nationalist histories may emphasize resistance while minimizing internal disagreement. Reading these sources against one another prevents a single institution from controlling the narrative.

Comparative claims also need proportional evidence. The slower or different growth of Protestantism in Japan and China cannot be explained only by Buddhism, Confucianism, or ancestor worship, because those traditions were also present in Korea in distinct forms. State formation, treaty relations, anti-foreign violence, educational systems, local networks, and the political meaning of conversion all mattered. Comparison should identify mechanisms rather than declare one culture more receptive than another.

Conclusion

Protestantism's rise in Korea resulted from the interaction of religious conviction, Korean agency, mission institutions, literacy, medicine, education, local leadership, geopolitical pressure, and changing [political identities](#). The movement began in the late Chosŏn period, expanded before formal annexation, and acquired new meanings under Japanese colonial rule. Schools, hospitals, print networks, Bible classes, and self-supporting congregations created durable social infrastructure. Korean Christians adapted these institutions and sometimes connected faith with reform and

independence, particularly around the March First Movement. Yet the relationship between church and nationalism was contested, and missionary power remained unequal. The most persuasive explanation is therefore not a single cause but a historically specific convergence of institutions, networks, ideas, and political crises (Cha; Kim).

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