

The Shinchon Massacre and the Church

According to the North Korean government, as the US Army came through Shinchon, North Korea, they hideously, cruelly and with extreme violence massacred some 35,000 people of the area. There is now a museum in Shinchon with extremely realistic and graphic displays showing US soldiers torturing, burning, drowning and otherwise killing the people. This massacre is a standard feature of many North Korean movies as a main subject or as background. When foreign tourists visit North Korea, especially Americans, they are often brought to the museum and meet with people who speak about their experiences at the time with great passion and obvious pain. However, the truth is not so and, as they say, the Devil is in the details – truly so.

We are now beginning to learn that the Shinchon Massacre was not perpetrated by US or South Korean soldiers but that it was a dark time for the Church – a time when the Devil had a field day and the Name of Jesus Christ was brought low.

Recent research, some of which is beginning to be released in South Korea, is starting to show a different story, one that has its roots in the past history of Christian North Korea. This research has been conducted both in North Korea and with survivors of Shinchon living in the US and elsewhere. North Korea now uses the fact of a great struggle in which some 40% of the population was killed for anti-American propaganda; however, the blame in this case cannot be laid upon an army that moved through the area so fast in its rush to the Yalu River that it had little consciousness of what was going on around it.

As the US and South Korean armies swept through North Korea in Mac Arthur's rush to push the Communists back to the Yalu River and into China, they moved so fast that town after town became "liberated" and left in the hands of anti-Communist residents. The army stayed on the roads and kept moving forward. Their eyes were on the goal, not the people around them. The roots of what we believe really happened go much farther back. It is something that we as Christians must think about deeply and consider what our part in this was.

From ancient times, Korea was a land of rich land owners, the *yangban* class – scholars, intelligentsia, government officials and upholders of the Confucian order. At the turn of the Twentieth Century, it has been estimated that 20% or less of the population owned the land; the remaining 80% were slaves, indentured servants and poor tenant farmers. The tenant farmers had to pay the land lords 80% to 90% of their produce from farming the land, keeping for themselves only 10% to 20%. As a result, their existence was one of extreme grinding poverty and ceaseless labor. This was the situation at the time of the arrival of Protestant Christianity and, in 1907, the great Pyongyang Revival. One of the things that we need to research, study and better understand is what impact the revival had or did not have on this system at that time. Whatever impact it may have had, as the years went by, the system absorbed the Church.

With the annexation of Korea by Japan in 1910, the Japanese began to take over the large holdings of the Yangban class without changing the system significantly. Their intent

was to turn Korea into Japan's breadbasket. The intelligentsia, who now were dispossessed of their holdings, began to develop the Korean Independence Movement. Tenant farmers, who were still no better off than before, began to respond and join the Movement. At this time, many of the Church's leaders became involved in the Movement as well. The famous Korean nationalist, Kim Ku, who first saw the way of national restoration through education in the Confucian Classics for the poor switched over and saw Christianity and Western ideas as holding out the greatest hope for independence and so was baptized a Christian. For a time, intelligentsia and tenant farmer had a common goal as they sought to throw out the new land lord class – the Japanese.

However, over time the situation changed completely. Many of the former land lords began to cooperate with the Japanese, the Church moved more to an internal, pietistic faith that would not engage in political movements. The Catholics built monasteries (as did the Buddhists) and the Protestants built large churches and schools. The monasteries gradually built up large landholdings and the Protestant churches, schools and clergy were supported more and more by wealthy land owners. During the Twentieth Century, despite the mighty outpouring of the Holy Spirit at Pyongyang and elsewhere, Christians were mostly the middle class, the intelligentsia and the land owners or collaborators with the Japanese. The poor tenant farmers did not become Christians to any great extent – they were too busy struggling to pay their exorbitant rents. They could not take time off from work on Sunday to go to Church much less rest and the Church did little to change the picture. In fact, the Church became more and more a part of the oppressive landlord system.

During the final months of the struggle against Japanese Imperialism during the Second World War, Kim Il Sung and the Korean Communists proclaimed a change in the land tenancy system starting the "Three Seven Movement." This was a movement calling for reduction of the tenant farmers rents from 80% to 30%--three tenths for the owner, seven tenths for the farmer. This movement grew in popularity among the tenant farmers and the poor. Many joined the Communist Party. Where was the Church in all this? Condemning Communism as atheistic while receiving support from the eight tenths going to the owners and keeping silent about the injustice of this land system.

Following Liberation, with the expulsion of the Japanese, Kim Il Sung proclaimed a total land reform – not just 30/70. He said that the land belongs to the farmer and the factories (supported by land wealth) belong to the laborers. He labeled Christianity as a religion that made the poor compliant – the "opiate of the people." He confiscated the large landholdings of the monasteries (Catholic and Buddhist) on the one hand, giving the land to the poor, and took the holdings of the Protestant land owners and Japanese collaborators on the other hand. The Church's response was to ignore the reality of the situation and condemn him as a godless thief and tyrant.

This was the situation in 1950 when the US and South Korean armies swept through Shinchon barely a month after the Inchon Landing. The 80% of the population that had been serfs were now in control and the 20% who were either the land owners or those of their class – which included most Church leaders, the educated, the business leaders and

so forth — were now on the bottom, those that had not been killed or had fled. The bitterness on both sides went very deep. It was a bitterness that had grown for generations from roots that are very deep in the Korean soul — a bitterness that still bears its bitter fruit today.

When the UN Forces (US and ROK) came through and the defending Communist army (the “People’s Army”) fled north, those who had been brought down from their exalted state of pride and wealth, now rose up in vengeance upon those who had once been their servants and tenants but were now their overlords. The revenge they (Christian and non-Christian alike) took upon the Communists was horrible. Then, during the night, Communist soldiers, left behind as the battles swept through so fast, came out of the hills and took their own revenge anew. And so it went for days. The result was a massacre of horrendous magnitude that took the lives of some 40% of the population in and around Shinchon. And where was the Church in all this? Standing on the sidelines supporting the upper and middle class while condemning the Communist farmers and laborers.

The Shinchon Massacre was not a massacre of Koreans by Americans but a killing of neighbor by neighbor and almost all the Christians were on one side of this struggle. The Church of Jesus Christ came through this period with blood on its hands for which it has not yet repented.

Communism is not the answer to the injustices and unjust system that the Church, at the least ignored and at the worst supported. But neither is the return of the land to its original owners (including large Protestant churches). Oh, yes, the former owners and their descendents know what land was theirs. They fled to South Korea where they built large churches and thrived economically. As they fled, they made sure to guard their land ownership documents closely. Where they had lost their documents, they contacted others who had fled from their towns and villages and had them sign affidavits stating what they knew of the boundaries of the land-holdings, testifying as to who the former owners were. Those documents are sacred to the families of these former owners who now live in South Korea and throughout the South Korean Diaspora. Congregations from many of the churches that once existed in North Korea have built new churches and congregations in South Korea but look forward to the day when reunification comes and they can go back and reclaim their landholdings. This is not the way of Christ or the way of Scripture.

There actually is a Biblical system of land ownership that is just and lays just foundations from which a healthy economy can grow, that reduces the gap between the rich and the poor and enables a man to enjoy the fruit of his own labor. But, it is a system that makes it very difficult to use land (created not by man but by God) as the foundation for great wealth and family fortunes so it is a system that the Church almost totally rejects — the Church has too great a vested interest in the system that currently exists in South Korea and the non-Communist world. Fr. Archer Torrey has written and taught extensively on justice, the Church and the land ownership system in such works

as his Biblical Economics¹ and numerous articles published in Korea, some of which are available in English from www.thefourthriver.org in the Library section.

The Church of Christ must look back at the history of the massacre in Shinchon, Korea with great humility as well as examine the complete history of its life in Korea, including such issues as complicity with the Japanese and the yielding to the pressure to worship the Japanese Emperor in the late Thirties. We, as Christians, must seek, on our knees in repentance and prayer, to understand what has happened in the past and the fruit it bears in the present. The wounds in the Korean Church and the Korean psyche are severe, the divisions go very deep. Before the Church can have any hope of once again bringing the light of the Gospel to the dark land of North Korea, we must examine ourselves and cleanse the blood of the poor from our hands through repentance. We must bridge the gulf between rich and poor, between the landed and the landless, between the generations; we must seek healing and become healers — channels for Jesus' precious love to flow.

Let us not be covered with the blood of those who were killed while we kept silent (or even supported) but rather, let us be covered with the Blood of Christ that cleanses all sin and makes us truly one.

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¹ Xlibris. 2000. The book can be obtained from www.xlibris.com.