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**From Bilateral to Multilateral:
DONG Suk Kee (동석기) and the Expansion of Church of Christ Missions Discourse**

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Outline

Introduction: The Growth of a Cappella Church of Christ Missions in East Asia after 1920s

1. Dong Suk Kee: From Methodism to a Cappella Churches of Christ
2. Dong's Acquaintance with J. M. McCaleb and the Beginning of His Work in Korea
3. McCaleb's Criticism Directed against Dong Regarding Financial Support
4. Criticized by an American, Defended by Other Americans

Conclusion

**From Bilateral to Multilateral:
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Introduction: The Growth of a Cappella Church of Christ Missions in East Asia after 1920s

A few decades after J. M. McCaleb began his Japan missions in 1892, the missions of North American a cappella Churches of Christ began to flourish in other parts of East Asia in mid 1920s through 1930s.² George S. Benson (1898-1991) went to Canton, China in 1925 as a missionary, although several months later he went Hong Kong as the Communist Party did not permit his work in Canton. While in Hong Kong, Benson went to the Philippines in May 1928 and engaged in mission work for about six months, with the encouragement and financial support of U.S. Church of Christ wealthy businessperson George Pepperdine.³ Another U.S. CofC missionary H.G. Cassell, a member of the church where Pepperdine served as an elder, arrived in October of the same year to carry on the Philippines missions.⁴ Benson was eventually able to return to Canton in January 1929, as the Chinese Nationalist Party was gaining strength in the region. In 1930, DONG Suk Kee (1881-1971), who had been in the United State, came back to his native land of Korea to establish the first a cappella CofC congregations in 1930.⁵

CofC missions in different parts of East Asia were connected in several ways. First of all, when Benson first went to China in 1925, he stopped by Japan and spent about a week with McCaleb in Tokyo. He also visited other rural CofC mission stations in Japan. Benson was disappointed to see the small number of Japanese Christians in those missions; thus, he established Canton Bible School in 1930 to train local Christians so that they would be instruments for better growth.⁶ Benson also launched a missionary periodical titled *Canton Christian* in 1929, and he changed the title to *Oriental Christian* in 1931 as it began to include

the stories of other parts of East Asia. The primary readers of the periodicals were the members of CofC in the United States who supported the East Asian missions.

While CofC missions in East Asia was heavily dependent upon the work of North American missionaries especially at the initial stage, the Korean situation was different. As the historians of Christianity in Korea often point out, Korean native Christians themselves were the driving force of evangelistic activities in the genesis of Protestantism in Korea.⁷ Likewise, native Korean Christians played a key role in the beginning of a cappella Churches of Christ in Korea. The aforementioned evangelist Dong Suk Kee was the key figure among them.

My aim in this presentation is to investigate Dong's relationship with the members of the a cappella Churches of Christ in the United States, as well as North American CofC missionaries in East Asia, to highlight his unique contribution in the trans-Pacific context. In what follows I will first summarize briefly the beginning of Dong's missions in Korea. Examining the pages of Church of Christ periodicals in 1930s, I will also focus on a series of arguments involving Dong. My argument is that through the process of those arguments Dong helped expand the Church of Christ missions discourse to be multilateral, rather than bilateral.

1. Dong Suk Kee: From Methodism to a Cappella Churches of Christ

Dong Suk Kee may well be the most successful and most dramatic evangelism in the history of East Asian CofC before 1945.⁸ Part of his evangelistic fervor may have derived from his prior engagement with the Methodist churches. Dong was among the pioneer Koreans who went to Hawaii to work in a sugar plantation in 1903. Impressed with Dong's sincerity and eagerness to work, the owner of the sugar plantation arranged for him to study in the United States. In 1909 he began his study of law at Northwestern University in Chicago, but he changed his major next year to study theology. Upon his graduation from the

university's Garrett School of Divinity in 1913, he was ordained in the Methodist Episcopal Church and came back to Korea in December of the same year to serve as a pastor in this denomination.⁹ In the 1914 annual conference of Korean Methodist Episcopal church Dong was introduced as one who had just come back from his ten-year stay in the United States and was ordained as a deacon.¹⁰ As a Methodist pastor, Dong was involved in the March First Independence Movement of 1919.¹¹

Dong's conversion to CofC took place in the United States a few years after he was involved in the March First Movement. Perhaps after being involved in a ministry in Manchuria as a Methodist pastor,¹² Dong went back to the United States in 1927 for further education. In the United States Dong somehow came in contact with the members of US Stone-Campbell churches. As a result, in 1928 he went to Cincinnati Bible Seminary, one of the primary theological institutions among conservative or independent Disciples churches. His master's thesis, written under the direction of the seminary's president Ralph L. Records,¹³ was on the early history of SCM in the United States. In the thesis Dong defended the movement's dogmatic plea to restore the New Testament Christianity out of the error of denominationalism. Toward the end of the thesis, however, Dong also emphasized the importance of spiritual fervor, perhaps with the kind of Christian spirituality he inherited from the Methodist heritage. Thus, one of the hindrances in the restoration movement of his day, according to Dong, was "laxity in Christian living," affected by "the spirit of worldliness and indifference to matters of religious interest," as well as the lack of consecration.¹⁴

Dong made a further move after graduating from the seminary in June 1930. This time, it was a shift within Stone-Campbell churches, from the independent Disciples to the CofC. The shift began to happen when Dong met a CofC minister T. B. Thompson in Montgomery, Alabama, during the time Dong was trying to raise funds by selling the Bibles. It was through Thompson's advice Dong went to Nashville to find a CofC congregation that

would provide sufficient financial support.¹⁵ Two churches in Nashville, Waverly Belmont Church of Christ, the same church that had supported Japan missionary B. D. Morehead and his wife who went to Japan in 1925,¹⁶ and Twelfth Churches of Christ, agreed to send Dong as a missionary to Korea.

2. Dong's Acquaintance with J. M. McCaleb and the Beginning of His Work in Korea

In Nashville, Dong also met J. M. McCaleb, a pioneer CofC missionary who had started his work in Japan in 1892. McCaleb was visiting there to report his mission, and apparently they got along very well. As a result, Dong asked McCaleb to be his adviser. In addition, the leaders of the Waverly Belmont church, the congregation that had decided to financially support Dong's work in Korea, asked McCaleb to report about Dong's work, probably because they trusted McCaleb more. In October 1930 Dong and McCaleb sailed together across the Pacific Ocean.¹⁷ The Waverly-Belmont church provided the cost of the trip.¹⁸ On November 9, 1930, a day after his arrival in Korea, Dong began preaching. Twenty days later, Dong established the first Church of Christ in Korea, as he baptized twenty Koreans on November 29.¹⁹ Dong was aware of the rhetoric of the Churches of Christ; so, he reported in a U.S. CofC periodical that he established the congregation "according to the New Testament pattern."²⁰ In accordance with the agreement he made with the Waverly-Belmont church, McCaleb visited Dong in Korea in 1931. McCaleb spoke fifteen times in a little over ten days, and thirty-one people were baptized by Dong.²¹ McCaleb never had such an experience in Japan.

Although passionately evangelizing without any US CofC missionaries on daily basis, Dong was certainly aware of the importance of his relationship with the US CofC. In fact, Dong often expressed his appreciation for US CofC members and missionaries, including McCaleb. A few months after Kim's visit to Tokyo Dong sent McCaleb a silk handkerchief

his wife made, along with a letter in which he said, “the warp and woof woven together make a useful piece of cloth...[just as] you and I work together to bring the Koreans to our Lord.”²² He even expressed his desire to have some US CofC missionaries in Korea.²³

As one who was aware of the teachings of CofC in the United States, Dong often used words and expressions that would be received well among US CofC members. As such, when writing for US CofC publications, Dong often showed his clear understanding of the uniqueness of CofC teachings. According to Dong, the first time “our Lord came to Korea” was in 1885, with the arrival of a Methodist missionary Horace Appenzeller.²⁴ Nevertheless, Dong wrote, there were no “perfect Christians” in Korea until “the real simple gospel of our Lord” came to Korea when Dong was sent back to Korea as a preacher by two US CofC churches in Nashville, Waverly-Belmont and Twelfth churches. Convinced of the ways he learned from US CofC, he made sure he was ready to preach the gospel with the kind of emphases the members of the US CofC would typically add. Thus, he wrote, he was full of his conviction of “exalt[ing] the Christ as the Lord and the Bible as the all-sufficient rule of faith and practice[,] instead of exalting the men and men-made rules,” as well as of “preach[ing] nothing but the simple gospel,” or of “speak[ing] where the Bible speaks” and be “silent where the Bible is silent,”²⁵ rhetoric that was familiar in the heritage of the Stone-Campbell churches.²⁶

3. McCaleb’s Criticism Directed against Dong Regarding Financial Support

The story of Dong Suk Kee involves friction that emerged as a result of Dong’s interaction with other US CofC members, particularly J. M. McCaleb. In 1934 Dong was involved in a series of rather unfortunate arguments with McCaleb and George Benson in the pages of US CofC periodicals. As noted above, McCaleb seemed to have a good relationship with Dong. At least Dong always expressed thanks for McCaleb’s help in his letter. However,

there emerged a note of discord between the two immediately after Dong stopped in Japan and visited McCaleb in October 1934. Dong was on his way to the United States to report on his work and seek more financial support.

The issue McCaleb raised was two-fold: financial support Dong was receiving from US churches, and McCaleb's distrust of Dong. In his usual fashion, McCaleb was quite straightforward and direct in making his case regarding Dong's financial support. According to McCaleb, Dong received from the US churches \$6,213.83 in three years and ten months. Knowing that Dong would soon be going to see his supporting church in Nashville, McCaleb suggested to the church that they should reduce the amount of financial support. McCaleb had several reasons for his argument. On the one hand his stated intention was for Dong's churches to be self-supporting. McCaleb was afraid that the churches might disappear if the financial support stopped.²⁷ McCaleb's claim about Dong's financial support was legitimate in light of the common custom among Korean Christianity of the day, namely, the so-called Nevius Method of self-propagating, self-governing, and self-supporting, which was "the universal accepted policy of Protestant missions in Korea."²⁸ On the other hand, McCaleb was not simply thinking about the issue of self-supporting.

What surfaced in this argument was not simply about the amount of Dong's support but about McCaleb's paternalism and distrust of, if not prejudice against, Dong. McCaleb assumed he had the authority to make a proper suggestion regarding the issue, and, more importantly, he probably assumed he had the responsibility to do so. His suggestion was very specific and straightforward, if not insulting: McCaleb explained that \$125, the amount Dong was receiving monthly, was so much that it could support Dong's family and an American family. "Forty dollars a month is ample for Brother Dong [with his wife and three children]," wrote McCaleb, for "it is not hardship for Brother Dong to live like the other Koreans."²⁹ For McCaleb Dong, however successful an evangelist he might have been, still needed to be

taught; and the one who teaches should have a proper manner to do so. Thus, he suggested to the leadership of Dong's supporting church that they should "treat him courteously, give him good advice, teach him the way more perfectly as you have opportunity."³⁰ Most striking was McCaleb's claim about Dong that was a direct violation of the principle of self-propagating, as he wrote: "Brother Dong should never have been sent back to Korea without an American co-worker....He needs help by some one with better judgment, more stable and better grounded in the faith."³¹ Therefore, while McCaleb appeared to be in support of the principle of self-support, his outright rejection of the principle of self-propagating reveals that the bottom line was McCaleb's paternalism and distrust of Dong.

4. Criticized by an American, Defended by Other Americans

McCaleb was not alone in his criticism of Dong. CofC China missionary George Benson expressed concern about Dong for a different reason, a dogmatic one. Benson became suspicious of Dong, because he had noticed that Dong made a few mission reports in the *Christian Standard*, the periodical supported by the conservative (independent) Disciples of Christ members.³² By this time US CofC had become quite sectarian and exclusive, assuming members of other denominations to be the objects of evangelism. Many in US CofC referred to Disciples members as "digressives," not brothers or even "ones who shared the same heritage." Benson also wondered if Dong's large number of converts might have included former Presbyterian members who were not immersed for remission of sins,³³ when they joined Dong's churches. Benson also reminded his readers that Dong had come from the Methodist church and his contact with CofC had been very brief. He was also concerned that there was no US CofC missionary to check on him in Korea. In contrast with McCaleb, Benson's concern was thoroughly a dogmatic one.

While Dong was accused by two of his influential co-workers in East Asia, it was CofC members in the United States who spoke up on his behalf. First, an official statement of Dong's endorsement, signed by the elders of Dong's supporting church in Nashville, was

published in the *Gospel Advocate*, Nashville-based and the most influential CofC periodical of the time.³⁴ This was published after Dong had met them. The statement was written specifically in response to “intimations and accusations” that had been made against Dong, though it did not specify who made the accusations. It concluded that all the members of the church “believe Brother Dong to be an honorable man, honest, and sincere, and a Christian worthy of the fullest confidence and fellowship of the church at large.”³⁵

The editor of the Nashville-based *Gospel Advocate*, one of the most influential CofC periodicals of the time, also supported Dong. He first added a note below the statement of the Nashville church elders. He wanted to make sure that his paper did not publish any accusations of Dong, and he confirmed Dong’s allegiance to CofC.³⁶ Two weeks later, Dong was given a space to publish a brief report of his work in the periodical. In the article he thanked the editor, repeated his oft-use rhetoric to show his allegiance to CofC, and reported he had baptized 151 Koreans and established four churches since he last left the United States in 1930.³⁷ The *Gospel Advocate* supported Dong further by publishing words of commendation a week later. The commendation was written by the elders of another church in Nashville, including an important CofC leader H. Leo Boles, and included the following words: “We have found him to be a brother in the Lord worthy of confidence and fellowship. He is loyal to the church of Christ.... We commend him to the churches of Christ everywhere.”³⁸

In the issue in which this commendation appeared the *Gospel Advocate* posted four large photos from Korean mission work in two pages. Pictured in the first photo were the members of the first CofC church, McCaleb, and Dong. The second and third photos depicted a large group of people waiting to be baptized by Dong, with a note that said that thirty-one and twenty-one people were baptized each time, respectively. The fourth one was the picture of more than fifty people who completed one of Dong’s two-week Bible training class.³⁹ Seeing these photos together, the reader of the periodical would have been left with a good impression of Dong’s work in Korea.⁴⁰

Finally, Dong did respond to the accusations in March 1935, while he was still in the United States. In an article which was accompanied by a good-size photo of him dressed in

traditional Korean clothing, Dong argued for the importance of his work and of the Korean mission field by appealing to the ways Korean people have been accepting the gospel: “Korea is a field which is all ready to harvest--that is, Koreans are more eager to know Jesus Christ than Chinese and Japanese, because the Koreans are humble and sincere in their characteristics, and they are very religious.”⁴¹ He also pointed out that three of the four recent baptisms at McCaleb’s church were Koreans. He then lamented that despite the pressing demand of the Gospel in Korea, he was the only CofC missionary while less successful Japan had sixteen US missionaries and China had ten of them.⁴²

Conclusions

As a cappella Churches of Christ began to develop missions in East Asia from mid 1920s through 1930s, there emerged some means to connect missions in China, Philippines, Korea, and Japan. Among them, Korean missions was unique, as it was largely carried out by Korean native workers. It was partly this uniqueness that led to the exchange of arguments regarding Dong and his work in the pages of three CofC periodicals over a period of five months.

Although the tone of the arguments was sometimes rather unpleasant, the exchange of arguments indicated a significant development in terms of CofC missions in East Asia. Perhaps beyond the intention of any participants in the exchange, the space where the exchange took place was Trans-Pacific. In other words, the space of Church of Christ missions discourse was expanded. In the course of those arguments missions was not simply discussed within one country or in a bilateral context, such as the United States and Japan or the United States and China. Rather, as Dong’s voice is heard, the missions discourse among Churches of Christ were taking place in a multilateral context across the Pacific Ocean. Prominent leaders of CofC in the United States fully participated in the discussion regarding missions. Those in Korea, China, Japan, and the United States participated all together in the exchange of arguments in the pages of two US-based periodicals and one China-based periodical. The authority of McCaleb, who had been seen as the central figure in the discourse of missions among Churches of Christ, was rather relativized in this expanded space.

Dong Suk Kee might be known as the pioneer of Church of Christ missions in Korea.

I hope we can also recognize his significance in the larger trans-Pacific context, namely, his contribution of expanding the missions discourse of entire Churches of Christ in 1930s.

¹ Some of contents in this paper are taken from the following dissertation of mine, although I have significantly altered the angle of analysis to focus on the work of Dong Suk Kee in this presentation: "Against the Odds: J. M. McCaleb's Missionary Vision of Universality in the Context of Imperial Japan, 1892-1945," PhD Dissertation submitted to Fuller Theological Seminary, 2016.

² For an excellent summary of Stone-Campbell missions in Asia during this time, see: D. Newell Williams, Douglas A. Foster, and Paul M. Blowers, ed. *The Stone-Campbell Movement: A Global History* [St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2013], 254-284.

³ George S. Benson, "Brother Pepperdine Visits Hong Kong," *Gospel Advocate*, June 14, 1928, 558; George S. Benson, "Word from the Philippine Islands," *Gospel Advocate*, December 6, 1928, 1159; Hicks, Benson, and Memphis State University Oral History Research Office, "Interviews with Benson," 96-97, 113.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 323. Cassell's wife Marie and their two sons came to the Philippines in the spring of 1929.

⁵ While "S. K. Dong" or "Suk Kee Dong" is quite consistently used in CofC histories written in English, other renderings, such as "Dong Suk Kui" or "Dong Sukki" are used in other histories. The Korean and Chinese names are: 동석기, 薰錫琪.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 147.

⁷ Byong-suh Kim, "Modernization and the Explosive Growth and Decline of Korean Protestant Religiosity," in *Christianity in Korea*, ed. Robert E. Buswell Jr. and Timothy S. Lee (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2006), 325.

⁸ One of few English writings on Dong includes: Joon Seo Kee, "Suk K. Dong and His Pioneer Work in Korea, 1930-1949" (Guided Research Paper, Harding Graduate School of Religion, 1977).

⁹ 서재룡, "Life and Ministry of Dong Suk Kee, a Precursor Church of Christ of Korea," [http://hompy.onmam.com/Download/DownLoad.aspx?filepath=/Updir/ONMAM_CHURCH/user_data/66092/files/&filename=%C7%D1%B1%B9+%B1%D7%B8%AE%BD%BA%B5%B5%C0%C7+%B1%B3%C8%B8+%BC%B1%B1%B8%C0%DA+%B5%BF%BC%AE%B1%E2%C0%C7+%BB%FD%BE%D6%BF%CD+%BB%E7%BF%AA\(0\).pdf](http://hompy.onmam.com/Download/DownLoad.aspx?filepath=/Updir/ONMAM_CHURCH/user_data/66092/files/&filename=%C7%D1%B1%B9+%B1%D7%B8%AE%BD%BA%B5%B5%C0%C7+%B1%B3%C8%B8+%BC%B1%B1%B8%C0%DA+%B5%BF%BC%AE%B1%E2%C0%C7+%BB%FD%BE%D6%BF%CD+%BB%E7%BF%AA(0).pdf), (accessed 8 February 2014).

¹⁰ In the minutes of the conference Dong was also listed as the secretary of Conference Temperance Society and a manager of the Wonju District of Home and Foreign Missionary Society. *Minutes of the Korea Annual Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church*, (Seoul: Chong Dong Methodist Episcopal Church, 1914), 2-3, 6, 15.

¹¹ Williams, Foster, and Blowers, *SCM: Global History*, 271.

¹² *Minutes of the Korea Annual Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church*, (Seoul: First Methodist Episcopal Church, 1924), 21. There are several English transliterations of Dong's name. "Dong Sukki" was used in this report.

¹³ 1928 was the year Records became the president of the seminary and led the seminary for further growth. Clark H. Scott, "The Life and Work of Ralph Lafayette Records" (MDiv thesis, Emmanuel School of Religion, 1977), 44-47.

¹⁴ S. K. Dong, "The Early History of the Restoration Movement in the United States" (MA thesis, Cincinnati Bible Seminary, 1929), 55-56.

¹⁵ Kee, "Suk K. Dong and His Pioneer Work in Korea, 1930-1949," 12.

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- ¹⁶ B. D. Morehead, "To Our Colaborers," *Gospel Advocate*, May 8, 1930, 446.
- ¹⁷ West, *Search for the Ancient Order*, 4:1919-1950: 367.
- ¹⁸ J. M. McCaleb, "Brother Dong Returns to America," *Christian Leader*, October 30, 1934, 10.
- ¹⁹ S. K. Dong, "The Gospel in Korea," *Firm Foundation*, April 25, 1939, 1. The date is also written on Dong's gravestone in the Forest Lawn Memorial Park in Los Angeles.
- ²⁰ S. K. Dong, "The Gospel in Korea," *Firm Foundation*, April 25, 1939, 1.
- ²¹ "Kojin Shosoku [News of individuals]," *Michishirube*, July, 1931, 21; Turner, "Pioneer to Japan," 109.
- ²² S. K. Dong, "Letter from Korea," *Oriental Christian*, February, 1932, 7.
- ²³ Dong, "The Gospel in Korea," 1.
- ²⁴ Dong does not mention Horace G. Underwood, Presbyterian missionary who arrived in Korea with Appenzeller in 1885.
- ²⁵ Dong, "The Gospel in Korea," 1.
- ²⁶ Dong wrote a master's thesis on Stone-Campbell history: Dong, "The Early History of the Restoration Movement in the United States."
- ²⁷ McCaleb, "Brother Dong Returns to America," 10.
- ²⁸ James Huntley Grayson, "A Quarter-Millennium of Christianity in Korea," *Christianity in Korea*, ed. Robert E. Buswell, Jr. and Timothy S. Lee (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2006), 13.
- ²⁹ McCaleb, "Brother Dong Returns to America," 10.
- ³⁰ Ibid.
- ³¹ Ibid.
- ³² George S. Benson, "S. K. Dong," *Oriental Christian*, Septemebr, 1934, 12.
- ³³ Forgiveness of sins through immersion was one of the crucial dogmas and identity markers of CofC.
- ³⁴ F. R. Jones, G. Q. Lipscomb, and R. P. Thurman, "Brother Dong Indorsed," *Gospel Advocate*, December 13, 1934, 1201.
- ³⁵ Ibid.
- ³⁶ John T. Hinds, "Editorial Note," *Gospel Advocate*, December 13, 1934, 1201.
- ³⁷ S. K. Dong, "Reviews Korean Work," *Gospel Advocate*, December 27, 1934, 1252.
- ³⁸ George S. Davis et al., "Commend Brother Dong," *Gospel Advocate*, January 3, 1935, 17.
- ³⁹ "Korean Mission Scene," *Gospel Advocate*, January 3, 1935, 18-19.
- ⁴⁰ Dong certainly appreciated the support of *Gospel Advocate* and its readers, as he wrote before he sailed back to Korea: "Through the kindness of the Gospel Advocate, I thank you very much for your kind help spiritually and materially for the work of our Lord in Korea while I was in America the last eight months. Indeed, I was treated with a brotherly love." S. K. Dong, "Korean Going Home," *Gospel Advocate*, August 1, 1935, 739.
- ⁴¹ S. K. Dong, "Korea a Fertile Field," *Gospel Advocate*, March 28, 1935, 305.
- ⁴² Ibid.