

The Great Table of Grace: Eucharist and the Korean Churches

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Celebrating the 10th anniversary of the Korean Worship & Music Conference, August 6-8, 2007, Stony Point Center, NY, the planning committee made a commitment to highlight two Sacraments of Christian faith for the two consecutive years of its annual meetings: Eucharist on 2007 and Baptism on 2008.

In this essay, we will visit five tables of grace; one for each of the five theological themes of Eucharist: (1) Thanksgiving to the Father; (2) Anamnesis or Memorial of Christ; (3) Invocation of the Spirit; (4) Communion of the Faithful; (5) Meal of the Kingdom.¹ At each of these five table points we will explore the implications of Eucharist for the Christian life and liturgy of Korean and Korean-American churches. I will draw on examples from the 2007 Korean Worship & Music Conference throughout.

The six worship services at the conference were started by an opening worship: Early Church Communion (3rd- 4th Century). This reconstructed early church liturgy was based on Hippolytus' *Church Order* and *the Liturgy of John Chrysostom* (349-407). The bilingual services, employing many antiphonal singing and reading, had its highlight on Presbyter's exhortation by Rev. Sung Taek Kim and the liturgy of the Upper Room by the preacher. The very first service set the tone of "communion at the crossroads" by introducing one very ancient practice of the great table of grace in the early church.

1. Thanksgiving to the Father

On the Sunday approaching Thanksgiving Day, the oldest woman in the congregation pulled me to one side and presented a hand written coupon from a Korean grocery store in

Flushing, New York, which was entitled to be exchanged for a 50-pound rice bag. She said that she had given rice to her church pastors on every Thanksgiving Sunday all of her life. She also added an apology for presenting a coupon rather than a real rice bag, because she no longer could carry all that heavy weight.

The coupon was bought with money which she saved from her social security check. When she offered it, I was in surprised silence. Then I began to ask myself what it means to celebrate "Thanksgiving Sunday" in the Korean way. We live in a world which has lost a sense of thankfulness for the meals we eat. The abundance of food in American society can no longer teach our children about the value of the life sustaining energy found in food.

On the Korean traditional Thanksgiving Day, "ChuSuk," Koreans celebrate with family gatherings, the harvest festival, also a full-moon festival with grave site visitation. The whole country experiences the heaviest traffic of the year as people travel from large cities to their homes in rural areas. On the major highways long lines of cars generally move in slow motion, giving the appearance of an extended parking lot.

The practice of offering food to a pastor may come from the Buddhist practice of "kongyang." They offer "kongyang" material things and anything else that may benefit others. They can restore their original human nature through their mutual offerings and accumulated merits. This Buddhist spirit of "kongyang" permeates the Korean culture and table-meal tradition in Korea. When an old lady in my church gave me the rice coupon, it was her act of merit making "kongyang" in the Christian context.

And her way of expressing "Thanksgiving to the Father" required a personal object, namely her church pastor, to demonstrate her piety as she lived all her life in Korean cultural context. The fact that she chose a bag of rice also represents all the creation God has made, and we return the portion of God's gift acknowledging that all things come from God. This is an act of prayer, of sacrifice in action that the bread and wine, fruits of the earth and of human labor, are presented to the Father God.

The great thanksgiving (Eucharist) is to the Father for everything accomplished by all God's action. At the Korean Worship & Music Conference we experienced the Eucharist as thanksgiving for creation, redemption, and sanctification by planning the Worship I in reformed liturgical worship. This formal setting was prepared in complete bi-lingual textual presentation

from the gathering to the sending. The Korean part was led by Rev. Paul Huh and the English part was led by his son, Daniel Huh, following the given liturgy from 찬송과 예배 *Come, Let us Worship: The Korean-English Presbyterian Hymnal and Service Book* (2001, Geneva Press). The father-son pair of the two liturgists represented a mutual family relationship between the first and the second generation Korean-Americans. Preacher, Rev. Paul Yang, and English translator, Rev. Charles Ryu, delivered “Amazing Love of God” in line by line conventional translation method.

The amazing grace of God’s table was symbolized by an elongated blue sheet of linen which originated from the pulpit on a raised platform and hung down to the communion table, and reaching to the middle hallway of the sanctuary all the way to the entrance door. God’s creation was thanked through the hymn sung after communion, “How Great Thou Art,” accompanied by saxophone solo and Yonsei University students from Korea. The church spoke thanksgiving on behalf of the whole creation uniting in many forms of voices: Korean and English, classical organ sound and Jazz improvisation, children and parents, men and women of all God’s creatures and holy things.

2. Anamnesis or Memorial of Christ

I remember -- more than a simple remembrance but embodied practice, which continues each time Koreans face the table of grace -- my parents preparing for the coming communion on a given day. I believe it was Good Friday evening, and they would go to a public bath to wash their bodies and fast all day. When the time came to receive the diced sweet bread and a small glass cup, they would pray, joining other adults in the sanctuary. As a child, I was not allowed to touch the elements and only observed them with curiosity. Many would weep for repentance on the call made by the pastor reciting scriptures. I remember that it was a Presbyterian church in Korea; however, the emphasis at that time was on the sacrificial body and the blood of Christ that they were eating and drinking.

The Eucharist is anamnesis of the crucified and risen Christ. Jesus who was sacrificed to accomplish our forgiveness of sins once and for all on the cross continues to minister to us as we remember and participate in his given body and blood. In Korea, of all the cultural understanding,

the sacrificial ritual of Confucians "chesa" is the most fundamental because all the others are based on it. Confucian life was thus centered and organized around sacrificial rites. The true value of sacrifice comes not from the value of the object, but from the efforts made in preparing it. In the past, kings or barons were required to offer the produce they themselves cultivated. They wore cloth their wives had woven for them for the particular occasion. They raised cattle to offer as sacrifice. The officiant was to kill the animal or at least supervise the killing.

The most important thing is the preparation of mind. The officiant is to purify their body and soul in relation to their environment. After bathing and changing, one is to refrain from sex, music, alcohol, and garlic. The officiant cannot visit the sick or attend a funeral, but simply stays at home, does not work and thinks only of the spirits to serve at the ceremony.

The Eucharistic prayer also states that the sacrifices are prepared with a sincere heart, and the offering is made to the spirit with a grateful heart. What makes the ritual "work" is the commitment made in preparing the sacrifices. Sincerity is known to move the spirits and make them enjoy the food and wine because they take the commitment people attach to the sacrifices. Thus the ritual creates an encounter between human and spirits, human and human, and human and nature. And the institutional narrative, the heart of the Eucharist reminds us of the real presence of Jesus Christ as we participate in the bread and wine.

The frequency of communion in Korea is pretty much set as four times a year as Geneva practiced, or perhaps twice a year. The Eucharistic Prayer has no structure other than reading the First Corinthians periscope as a warrant at the beginning of the Invitation. Usually selected Scripture is read by the minister during the distribution. There are very few descriptions of Korean Holy Communion practice. Edward W. Poitras, a Western missionary, explains his experience as the Methodist Seminary professor in Korea,

In general the atmosphere in many Methodist communion services might seem quite casual to the western observer. The pastor may well give sundry instructions to the congregation during the ritual, and the juice is often poured into the small cups on the communion table from a small tea kettle by the sacristan. Many traditional Korean religious rituals are quite informal and relaxed, and that background may be an influence upon Christian observances.²

These “casual” and “informal” practices of the Eucharist in the Korean churches is highlighted on Good Friday which once again emphasizes the ‘sacrifice’ and ‘offering’ aspects of the Korean traditional religious expressions.

Celebrating Jesus’ sacrifice at the Korean Conference on Worship & Music, the Worship II was presented in an emerging style employing visual resources from contemporary images. After taking time to learn new praise songs, candles were lighted and children processed in with special music and an open mike of personal witness was followed. And visual images of Christ’s sacrifice were projected on the screen as Holy Communion was administered. The healing prayer and anointing with oil accompanied the communion. The emphasis on a small group as an upper room setting was accentuated to focus on the work of Christ Jesus as the personal savior. The anamnesis of Christ became the very content of the preached Word in the service.

3. Invocation of the Spirit

The church prays to the Father for the gift of the Holy Spirit in order that the Eucharist may be a reality. And the church continues to pray for the world in the prayer of intercession along with “epiclesis” for the presence of Jesus Christ and changing not only the elements, but more strongly changing the heart of worshippers. The change is taking place by the power of the Spirit as people partake of the elements in receiving the body and blood of real present Christ in bread and wine.

Out of the main religions of the Korean people, the ways of calling of the spirit was often associated with the folk religion. The gospel is often mixed with shamanism, syncretistically adapted to its power sources which are built around a system of reward and retribution. It is inseparable for Korean Christians to dismiss the influence of shamanistic spirituality. The “gut 굿” table must be examined carefully and theologically, drawing on its communal nature and healing power for troubled people in Korea.

Calling of the Spirit at Korean Conference on Worship & Music was the theme of Worship III: Taizé Prayer. The worship began in the spirit of Taizé community’s songs in a decorated room with a number of lit candles. Magnificat and Gloria were sung in canon and

Psalm was chanted with alleluia. Bless the Lord with a descant obbligato was followed by *Veni Sancte Spiritus*. The 10 minutes silence was broken by Scripture reading.

The communion prayer was sung in a newly composed setting by Hyun Chul Lee, resident composer of World Vision Children's choir in Korea. The beautiful tunes are in two different metrical settings. One is for *Sursum Corda* and *Hosanna* combined in 4 verses, and the other one is institutional narrative in 3 verses. The joyful music sung by the celebrant and people invited the congregation and the spirit in a very pleasant way to the great table of grace.

4. Communion of the Faithful

The communion of the faithful is in Trinitarian relationship. How Father interacts with the Son and the Spirit, and how Son interacts with Father and the Spirit. It is the "communion ecclesiology" which the church's theology is based on. The Communion Ecclesiology is an ancient methodology reclaiming the vision of the church prior to the divisions among Eastern Orthodox, Roman Catholic, and Protestants. The contemporary Korean church faces a relational crisis in worship and theology among the conservative, evangelical, progressive, and ecumenical groups. The polarity deepens in theological as well as in ecclesiological realms which extend beyond the denominational differences.

The "communion/koinonia of saints" in relational manner addresses the "perichoresis" of the Trinitarian dynamic reflected in ecclesiastical community. For a Korean contextual adaptation of the issue, the meal ritualism of Buddhism, Confucianism, and Shamanism need to be discussed in the context of Eucharist in Korean churches. The main focus here would be the relational manner that each religion had to offer in each of their table fellowships.

The Eucharist enhances communion of the faithful in interaction and solidarity within the community. In this sharing and exchange of life in mutual relationship, the "communion of the saints" is the will of Heaven as well as the principle of communal love. The Eucharistic table adds to happiness and solidarity between the individual and one's community by the sharing of such food with everyone in a harmonious dialogue between human and heavenly hosts.

When the table is crowded with our own agenda, Jesus will turn our table upside down as he cleansed the temple when he saw the house of prayer was turned into a den of robbers. The communion table is the place where Jesus is the host and our master. The meal ritual practices of

Buddhism, Confucianism, and Shamanism all preceded Christian worship and the Eucharist in Korea as a means of offering and sacrifice. Professor Chung, Chang Bok translates the Korean use of Eucharist, “sung-man-chan,” as a “holy dinner.”³ Chung also recognizes the Eucharistic relationship with ancestor worship but warns:

While ancestor worship provides some analogies to Christian Eucharist -- like the function of remembrance of the communion of saints and the cohesiveness of all who are joined into the household of God -- it is obviously open to flagrantly superstitious misuse.⁴

On integrating the meal-ritual practices of Korean religions, Christianity has not responded favorably to its adaptation because of allusions to the ancestor veneration. However, Catholics show a little more acceptance than the Protestants in the matters of “ancestral worship.” The table fellowship of each community is a ritual which reflects their social experiences.

During the ritualized eating and drinking with the disciples at Emmaus, the living Jesus Christ became present among them. It was within the social experience that the disciples discovered Christ on eating and sharing the experiences of life together, a crisis of losing the master and rediscovering him in both flesh and in spirit. This Christ's “movement” is a Table-Community movement. In other words, this movement for the reign of God means sharing with others, especially the poor and the oppressed.

Kim, Chi Ha, the famous Korean poet and a ‘minjung’ theologian wrote the following poem, which became the starting point of the concept of the Christian meal-ritual among the “minjung” churches in Korea:

Heaven is rice
As we cannot go to heaven alone
We should share rice with one another
As all share the light of the heavenly stars
We should share and eat rice together
Heaven is rice

When we eat and swallow rice
Heaven dwells in our body
Rice is heaven
Yes, rice is the matter
We should eat together.⁵

Where there is selfishness, there is no Jesus Christ. Jesus reveals himself in the midst of sharing together.

In the Eucharistic meal, in the eating and drinking of the bread and wine, that is, in the midst of sharing, Christ grants communion with himself. Through the Eucharist, God acts, giving life to the body of Christ and renewing each member. In the feeding of the hungry, the people experienced deep feelings of liberation while they ate the food together.

The Korean Conference on Worship & Music presented Worship IV: Blended Worship integrating multi-generational and multi-cultural elements. It was the closing worship service; therefore, every registered participant designed the service together reflecting the communion of all God's faithful. Adults gathered at a designated place, and children gathered around to make the procession, creating a cross of generational unity. Psalm 133 was sung with emphasis on unity, and small groups were created, forming five extended families. Each newly formed extended family sent one child and one adult as communion assistants. There was much movement of joyful dancing, affirmation of the unity, and hopeful exchanges of all God's saints. Out of exuberant energy, people were led outside of the building to continue the joyful march accompanied by Korean drums and instruments.

5. Meal of the Kingdom

When a family assembles in Korea during holidays, the main activity is serious eating. In ancient days, traditionally women danced the famous circle dance, "kanggang-suwolae," watching the full moon at night. In holidays, the families get together making rice-cakes, competing with each other to see which cake is the prettiest. A Westerner who sees a public television program in Korea will immediately discover how often the meal time scene appears in most of the evening dramas. Korean family life is based on the round table meal. The foods are

organized in such a way that all who share the same table also share the same pot of casserole, the same side dishes, meats, and fish. Kimchi, the popular pickled cabbage, is often made as a common project by the town women on a set day.

The ritual of table-meal fellowship is the most basic ritual of all. In this prime relationship, the "I-Thou" ethos of Martin Buber, "communitas" according to Victor Turner is found. Turner's theory of "communitas" is in almost perfect agreement with his understanding of religion, which he thinks is created by those who are socially inferior.⁶ According to Turner, the structurally inferior are the morally and ritually superior; secular weakness is sacred power.⁷ Sins and disasters were brought on by structural superiors; they are burnt out or washed away by "communitas," which is the outcome of the ritual.⁸

For Victor Turner, ritual is a social drama. Turner's ritual theory rejects the structural-functionalist view that ritual reinforces the social structure by reflecting the social distinctions and promoting social order. For Turner, ritual is anti-structural since it "liberates" its participants from the obligation to structures. He sees society and community as a process and ritual as a social drama. Ritual is produced by social conflict and life crises rather than in order to promote social order.

The purpose of meal ritual is precisely in this relationship. The purpose of ritual is not to overthrow the structure. Rather, it brings the social structure and *communitas* into a right mutual relationship once again. Through the celebration of meal rituals, we once again discover the place of community in participating in the breaking and eating of the bread.

The church also shares a common conception of table fellowship after the service. A majority of Korean American churches in the States eat a light meal together every Sunday after the service. Sunday without a church meal is not really a Sunday for most Korean Americans. This has also been the case with African American churches. Korean-American immigrants view their journey to America as in pilgrimage to the American land. In this foreign land, the Korean church functions as a "*domus*" for their life. There are various meal rituals which the Korean people practice.

Soon Whan Kim's unpublished doctoral dissertation is precisely on this aspect of the collective farming community and eating rituals as symbolisms of the Korean culture.⁹ The eating of rice or rice cakes is, whether such occasions take place in common meal or in sacred

consumption rituals, a central activity of Korean people. Eating provides a locus of fellowship with others: fellowship with companions in the common meal, and fellowship with deities in sacred consumption. Rice is actually intermingled with every reality of the life of Koreans.¹⁰

Rice represents the life of the people. It is the most fitting symbol to represent the Eucharistic elements. The elements are already prepared and placed on a table with a white linen cover on it. It reflects the grace of God which is prepared as a gift. A variety of elements are used for the bread. However, the wine is most likely replaced by grape juice. Having both rice wine and rice cake for the communion elements symbolizes that both Christ's body and blood are all of Christ, just as rice wine and rice cake are all made of rice. The unity of bread and wine is represented in the same rice as it signifies both the body and blood of Jesus Christ.¹¹

Korean communion often is accompanied by an additional sermon, in a combination of a lecture and a charge, a teaching at the table. The celebrant shows a serious concern with the participants' correct understanding of the Eucharist theology. It is important to know why we eat, yet it is equally important to select what we eat and more important to prepare our hearts concerning how we eat. Following the Korean customary to feed their guest first, the celebrant and servers take the communion last, after first serving the entire congregation. In the Korean custom, the host takes the food only after the guest takes it.

The Puritan communion tradition of sitting down to receive the elements is widely practiced among the Korean worshippers. Because the churches experience problems of limited space and limited time, the quickest and the most efficient way of serving the communion has been encouraged. Due to a space limitation and cramped time schedule on Sunday services, which is limited to 45 minutes to one hour, some churches administer the communion at weekday prayer meetings,¹² others during the Lord's Day services.

The Korean Conference on Worship & Music celebrated Worship V: Traditional Korean Folk Festival Worship, working around the meal of the kingdom emphasis. The worship planner, Rev. Seung Nam Kim, designed the service around the meal table starting with sounding a gong 3 times. All the gifts including dinner were brought with the processional music and set on the table with thanksgiving song in a Korean traditional tune. The entire service, including the sermon, had different settings of Korean composers in folk style emphasizing the communal meal as the sign and symbol of the coming reign of God.

A meal is for everyone. And the communion affirms for us the relationship of the human with the divine, nature, and other humans. The importance is in our sincerity in sharing with everyone whom we meet. The meal deserves more "thanksgiving" on our part as a form of offering and sacrifice. Like the old lady who remembers giving the rice to her pastors on every Thanksgiving Sunday, we also must remember the value of giving thanks in spirit as well as in flesh to the giver of all meals.

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Abstract

Title: The Great Table of Grace: Eucharist and the Korean Churches

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In the essay, five tables of grace are explored: one for each of the five theological themes of Eucharist as outlined in World Council of Churches' *Baptism Eucharist & Ministry* document: (1) Thanksgiving to the Father; (2) Anamnesis or Memorial of Christ; (3) Invocation of the Spirit; (4) Communion of the Faithful; (5) Meal of the Kingdom. At each of these five table points, the implications of Eucharist for the Christian life and liturgy of Korean and Korean-American churches are discussed along with traditional religions of Korea: Buddhism, Confucianism, and Shamanism. The author draws on examples from the 2007 Korean Worship & Music Conference held at Stony Point Center in New York throughout.

*Key Words:

Eucharist, communion, Korean church, Sacraments, Worship & Music
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¹"Baptism, Eucharist, and Ministry." Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1982, 10-17.

²Edward W. Poitras (Pak Tae In), "Ten Thousand Tongues Sing: Worship among Methodists in Korea," *The Sunday Service of the Methodists: Twentieth-Century Worship in Worldwide Methodism*, Karen B. Westerfield Tucker, editor, Abingdon Press, 205.

³Chang Bok Chung, "Indigenization of Worship: the Holy Dinner," *Northeast Asia Journal of Theology*, No. 18-19:46-52, Mr-S, 1977.

⁴*Ibid.*, 51.

⁵Cited in Masao Takenaka, *God is Rice*, Geneva: World Council of Church, 1986, 18.

⁶Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure*, Chicago: Aldin Publishing Co, 1969, 190.

⁷*Ibid.*, 125.

⁸*Ibid.*, 183-5.

⁹Soon Hwan Kim, "The Symbolic dimension in the Korean Protestant Worship and its Relationship with the Inculturation of the Eucharistic Elements," Drew University, Unpublished Ph.D. Dissertation, 1996.

¹⁰*Ibid.*, 228.

¹¹The rice which represents the Christ in both bread and wine was discovered by the writer as he was preparing an 'authentic Korean worship' for chapel at Drew University Theological School in 1994.

¹²Mostly mega-sized churches in the city, such as Youngnak, Kwangsung, Myungsung, etc.