Asian Thresholds

The Ancestral Rite in Korea: Its Significance and Contextualization from an Evangelical Perspective

by Paul Mantae Kim

Editor's Note: This article will be recast in an upcoming book edited by Daniel Shaw and William Burrows on traditional rituals and Christian worship (ASM monograph under Orbis Books). These editors wish to reduce the Western concern for syncretism as a negative result of contextualization and herald hybridity as a more positive consequence, the latter being both necessary and relevant to the local development of spirituality in all its varied manifestations. Their hope in mission is to allow the tender prompting of the Holy Spirit to bring local reflection, assessment, and practical adjustment in applying ancient expressions encapsulated in ritual and ceremony to the reality of worshiping God in all his glory.

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hristian controversy over the Korean ancestral rite has simmered over the last 200 years. The rite persists today and still holds an important place among Korean people. I begin with an introduction of the issue followed by the nature and motifs of the ancestral rite. The rest of the study addresses a relevant evangelical Korean engagement with the rite. My intention is to encourage discussion over the issue rather than to give a definitive solution.

Before proceeding further, let me give a brief historical overview of the issue in Korean Christian history. Christianity first encountered Korean ancestral rites when Catholics came to Korea in the late 18th century. At the beginning, the Catholic mission rejected them and then had to face strong opposition from Korean people (Kim 2005, 317). For this reason, many Catholic missionaries and their Korean converts were martyred. At that time, the Catholic mission considered ancestral rites to be idolatry. In a radical change of their initial position, Roman authorities revisited the so-called "Chinese Rites Controversy" and allowed Catholics to observe traditional Confucian ancestor rites. In a similar fashion, many Korean Catholics practice either traditional ancestral rites or an alternative practice that incorporates traditional elements with their Catholic faith. On the other hand, Protestant missions, which began in Korea in 1884, condemned the ancestral practice from the beginning, just as the Catholics had done (Ok 2005, 219–27). Today, most Korean Protestant churches still disapprove of ancestral rites although they allow a Christian form of memorial service.

Significance of the Study

Why do we need to conduct a serious study of the Korean ancestral rite? How does this study relate to evangelical Christian life in Korea? I see at least

three reasons why this discussion is both necessary and important: (1) Korean Christians frequently clash with their unbelieving family members about the observance of the ancestral rite; (2) Korean Protestants recognize a need to go beyond current Christian memorial services and generate a better alternative; (3) a resolution of the issue is essential to improve the public image of Protestantism in the Korean society. I will expand on each of these.

When I became a Christian, my family had been sincerely observing ancestral rites for generations. At that time, I had a combative attitude toward my parents, and I determined that I would not betray God by attending the ritual. My parents were unhappy about my absence but they were tolerant of me. When my parents later became Christian, my father decided to replace the traditional ancestral rite with a Christian memorial service. After this replacement, regrettably, my uncle and his family never showed up for our new Christian practice regarding ancestors. They gradually disconnected themselves from my family since our adoption of Christian practices for ancestral veneration. Note that this example from my own family demonstrates a problem that is repeated in many other families, one that makes many Koreans reluctant to become Christian, because they do not want to abandon the traditional ancestral rite.

Marriages between Christians and non-Christians can face a serious conflict over observance of ancestral rites. According to a news report, a Christian Korean woman who refused to attend the ancestral rite was divorced by her husband (Kang 2012). When someone converts and becomes a Protestant Christian, and if his parents are not Christian, how should he deal with ancestral rites? Korean Christians need to discover a proper resolution for the problems relating to traditional ancestral rituals in their relationship with unbelieving family members. In

relation to this issue, Chuck Lowe did an in-depth study of how churches should respond to Chinese popular ancestral practices. In this study, he recommends that churches should not ignore the people's social and cultural traditions and that Christian converts should be able to celebrate family occasions and traditional festivals without either offending their relatives or compromising their Christian faith (Lowe 2001, 271).

Korean Protestants increasingly recognize a need to reexamine traditional ancestral rites and to go beyond current Christian memorial services to generate a better alternative. This article is an endeavor to carry that

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forward. Moreover, statistical data shows that more than a few Protestant Christians feel their current memorial services are spiritually insufficient. In this regard, 24.8 % of Protestant respondents agreed, 27.9% disagreed, and 47.3% were undecided when asked if they think their Christian memorial services are spiritually satisfying (Hansin University Theological Institute 2005, 229). Furthermore, 36.7% agreed, 33.2% disagreed, and 30.1% were undecided when asked in a survey whether Korean Christianity needs to positively incorporate traditional funeral or ancestor rituals without damaging the essence of Christian faith (Hansin University Theological Institute 2005, 228).

In this regard, Bongho Son, a Protestant Christian ethicist, has stated that Protestant churches urgently need a new memorial service that does not ignore the traditional rite and that retains biblical teachings (Kim 2011). A Korean sociologist, Sungyoon Cho, has shown that Protestant forms of memorial services clash with traditional forms of the ancestral rite. He claims a need to harmonize these two forms and points out that Protestant churches are reluctant to address this issue for fear that they will be condemned as heretical (Kim 2011). Inwoong Son (a well-known Korean pastor), argues that we should not reject the ancestral rite simply as idolatry, but give attention to its essence of filial piety (Hyo). He suggests that Protestant churches should have sincere conversations over the issue and search out an appropriate method that avoids conflicts with Korean traditional culture while evangelizing (Ko 2013).

Third, this study may lead to an improvement of the public image of Protestantism in the Korean society. Korean Protestantism experienced a modest decrease in 2005 after the previous few decades of explosive numeric growth, according to national survey results. In concrete terms, the actual number of Korean Protestants decreased by 1.4% from 1995 to 2005, according to a Korean national survey; in contrast, Catholics were reported to have increased by 74.4% during the same period (Cho 2012). This decrease may be attributed in some measure to the decline of the public reputation of Korean Protestantism in society. According to the Korean Ministerial Sociology Institute (2006), one of the major reasons is that many Koreans think Protestantism has an exclusivist stance toward Korean traditional culture. As a result they regard Protestantism as extraneous and prefer Catholicism, which is more accepting of traditional culture.

Statistical research of Korean perception of culture shows that ancestral

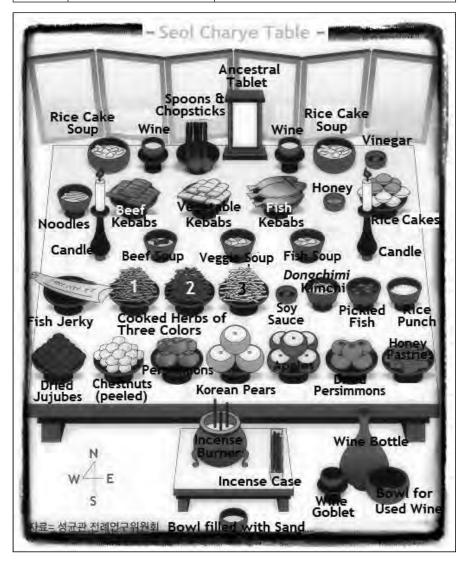
rites still occupy an importance place in the lives of Korean people. When Koreans were asked if they agreed with the practice of traditional ancestral rites, 66.5% of the respondents replied positively; 22.1% disapproved; and 11.4% were undecided. On the other

hand, more than fifty percent (50.9%) of Protestant Christians disapproved of ancestral rites, and only 32.7% approved of them. By contrast, the majority of other groups approved of the rites, including Catholics (71.4%), Buddhists (83.3%), persons without

Figure 1. A Typical Ancestral Rite Table with Objects (Adapted from http://mydearkorea.blogspot.com/2012/01/korean-culture-new-years-day-5_29.html)

A basic set of rules for setting the table:

	MAIN ITEMS	SIDE OF THE TABLE
1 st Row	Spoons & Chopsticks, Rice	ddeokguk (left), wine (right)
2 nd Row	Beef, Fish, Vegetables	fish (east), beef (west)
3 rd Row	Soups	fish (east), vegetable (middle), beef (west)
4 th Row	Jerky, Herbs, Rice Punch	fish jerky (left), rice punch (right)
5 th Row	Fruits	red fruits (east), white fruits (west) (left to right) jujube, chestnuts, pears



religion (73.4%), and others (66.7%). This statistical data points out that most Koreans attach importance to traditional ancestral rites (Hansin University Theological Institute 2005, 229). Other data indicate that respondents without religion regarded the rejection of ancestral rites as one of the greatest mistakes Korean Catholics made in the past (Kim Jae Deuk, Park Moon Su, and Park Il Young 2004, 54). Ancestral rites hold a most eminent place in Korean traditional cultural practice. Their observance reflects whether or not a person acknowledges Korean cultural traditions. Korean Protestantism cannot disregard the issue of ancestral rites if it wants to be accepted by non-Christian Koreans who comprise about eighty percent of the population.

Description and Motifs of Korean Ancestral Rites

Ancestral rites are offered for up to four generations of ancestors. Today, it is not unusual for Koreans to commemorate only two or three generations of ancestors (Kim 2001, 94). There are some other changes in ancestral practices of today: (1) quite a few families perform the rites in the evening instead of at midnight for their convenience (Kim 2007, 279); (2) some families offer the foods that their ancestors preferred during their life time (Yoon 2005, 331); (3) ancestral couples can be jointly venerated (Kim 2007, 284); (4) more and more women are allowed to participate in the ritual (see korea4expats.com).

Two kinds of ancestral rites are performed at home, one being holiday rites (charye) and the other death-day rites (kijesa) (Janelli and Janelli 1982, 86). Two holiday rites are performed annually on lunar New Year (Goojung) and Korean Thanksgiving days (Choosok), and these are offered to multiple ancestors back to four generations (Kim 2001, 94). On the other hand, death-day rites are offered for an individual

ancestor near midnight of the day before he or she died, which is to ensure they occur at the time when he had been alive (Janelli and Janelli 1982, 93). Thus, a typical family conducts ten ancestral rites a year (two holiday rites and eight death-day rites) if they memorialize four generations of ancestors. In this chapter, I explore only the death-day rites (rather than the holiday rites) that are more frequently performed among Korean people. Hereafter, when I speak of "ancestral rites" I am referring only to death-day rites.

Ritual Objects and Procedure

Ancestral rites are usually performed at home, although they may be held at shrines. The most prominent object in these rites is the table that holds the various objects. All the objects must be put in places designated by ritual codes. Various kinds of food are offered. In the traditional Korean belief system, the spirits of ancestors are believed to come and eat the food. An ancestral tablet is usually attached to a folding screen just behind the ritual table. This tablet is believed to be the place where the ancestor stays during the rite. Wooden tablets (shinju, wipae) were originally used, although paper tablets are more commonly used today. The tablet contains the ancestor's name, title, and place of origin written in black ink. Candles and incense are lighted, which are assumed to invite and welcome the spirits of ancestors. (See Figure 1 on p. 119.)

The eldest son of the household presides over the ancestral rite, and only males participate in the ritual

procedures as such, although women prepare food for the ritual table. Male participants follow the direction of the ritual presider, and the ritual itself is usually performed in a master bedroom (Anbang). Korean ancestral (deathday) rites have four major phases: (1) inviting and welcoming the ancestors; (2) serving food to the ancestors; (3) seeing ancestors off; and (4) together with one's relatives and fellow descendants, eating the food that has been offered. (See Figure 2 below.)

The ritual begins by inviting and welcoming the ancestors. The presider (the eldest son) goes to the gate of the house and opens it so that ancestors may enter. He welcomes them by bowing his head to the ancestors who are believed to have returned (as spiritual beings) to visit their descendants on the anniversary of their death (Bae 2002, 292). The household arranges the ritual table and the presider lights candles and burns incense (Kim 2001, 101). The presider executor then offers a glass of alcoholic beverage and bows three times toward the ancestral tablet (two head-tofloor bows and then a light bow from the waist) as an act of invitation (see korea4expats.com). At this time all the male participants greet the ancestor by bowing three times, followed by a male participant chanting a speech written in Chinese with the proper intonation (Janelli and Janelli 1982, 87).

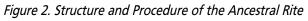
In the second phase, the household serves food to the ancestors. The ritual presider lays a spoon and chopsticks on the foods he wishes to offer them, moving from one dish to another as he and other males bow to the ancestors. They then leave the room so that the ancestors may freely enjoy their meal, and after an interval the male participants return to provide water for the ancestors.

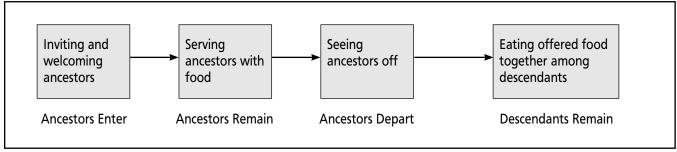
The third phase involves seeing the ancestors off by bowing three times as they return to the world of the afterlife. Finally, the ritual presider burns a paper tablet and a written address, and then participants go to the gate of the house to see them off. When the ancestors have left, members of the household withdraw the table and together eat the food that has been offered and enjoy a time of fellowship as living descendants.

Meaning and Experience of Ancestral Practices: Interview with Respondents

To learn how death-day rites are interpreted and experienced, I interviewed two Koreans in Los Angeles and Orange County, California, in April 2013. Both interviewees had been attending ancestral rites and showed enthusiasm for the practice. I interviewed each one for about an hour, one in person and the other by phone, using a semistructured interview method in which three major questions were asked: (1) What motivates you to carry out these ancestral practices? (2) What do you experience during these ancestral practices? (3) How do you think ancestral practices influence your family?

Respondent Jun Kim was fifty-one years old with a wife and three children. (Here and in what follows, I use fictitious names.) He emigrated from South Korea and has been living in the US for about ten years. His mother and three sisters also live in the US.





He grew up in a Buddhist family and has participated in traditional ancestral rites since childhood. He still practices the rites in the US, although he became a Catholic at the age of thirty. He said that he had somewhat simplified the ritual for convenience.

- 1. Motivations for Doing Ancestral Practices: The respondent has been doing ancestral rites because he used to do it for many years from his childhood. Although Catholic churches provide their own forms of ancestral rituals, he opted to follow the Korean traditions with which he was familiar.
- 2. Feelings and Experiences: When the respondent was young, he did not understand his father's strictness and ways of performing the ritual. However, having raised his own children, he can now understand his late father's heart and mind. He said,

When I was young and my father was alive, I was very afraid of him. However, I see myself becoming the same as my father. I now realize that my father was a good person. I respect him.

3. The Influence of the Practice on the Family: When the respondent bows down toward his late father during the rite, he says, "Enjoy this food. Please look after and prosper this family," so that his children may hear it. By doing this, the respondent wished blessings upon his family and reminded his children of their relationship with their grandfather. He emphasized that ancestral rites offer a chance for his siblings and their children to gather together and observed that without the rites they would seldom get together. He saw that one of the functions of ancestral rites was to enhance family gathering and fellowship.

The other respondent, Hyun Lee, was forty-five years old. He emigrated from South Korea to the US about

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five years ago. He is married with two children. His father lives in South Korea and his mother passed away many years ago. Although his family converted from Buddhism to Catholicism they continue to perform traditional Korean ancestral rites for his late mother. Since coming to the US, his family and his three sisters' families gather together to practice the Catholic form of ancestral practices, which combines Catholic and traditional Korean forms.

- 1. Motivations for Doing Ancestral Practices: The respondent says that he performed the ancestral rites to observe Korean tradition, to memorialize his mother, and to assist his mother's soul to move from purgatory to heaven.
- 2. Feelings and Experiences: The respondent said he believed that his late mother visits the ancestral rituals they perform. He recollects her, sensing her presence during the rituals and feels grateful and remorseful towards her. He and his sisters share a memory of his mother. He comes to understand his parents' heart now that he himself is also a parent.
- The Influence of the Practice on the Family: The respondent believes that ancestral practices positively influence his children, who are reminded of their grandmother, and this enhances family relationships and deepens their sense of belonging. It offers a chance for his children to meet their cousins. The ancestral rites bring his siblings together and sustain their relationship even though they had once had conflicts with one another. The late mother functions as a relational link between her offspring. These practices help them establish their identity as family.

The Transition from Traditional Rite to Christian Memorial Service: My Family's Experience

My family was Buddhist, and I participated sincerely in its observance of the ancestral rites until I became a Christian at the age of twenty-two. My family practiced these rites no less than eight times a year. Upon becoming a Christian, however, I stopped attending these rituals because I thought that if I continued to join in them I would compromise my Christian faith. My father continued to preside over the rites and was not happy with my absence, although he never scolded me about it and was outwardly tolerant. When he became a Christian, he chose to celebrate a Christian memorial service instead of the traditional ritual, and I was happy about his decision. I realized over time, however, that something vital was missing from our observance of the Christian ceremony in comparison to the feelings that attended the traditional ritual. This led me to reflect on the deeper significance of the ancestral rites and to come to several conclusions about my family's experience.

My first observation has to do with my father's loss of position as the ritual leader. In the past, my father presided over our traditional ritual, while my brothers and I followed his directions. When my father became a Christian, he did not know anything about conducting a Christian memorial service. As a result, I was asked to lead the service, since I was a seminary student. I felt guilty that I, the youngest of the three sons, had robbed my father of his noble position.

Second, I came to reflect on the fact that the exclusion of ritual symbols in our Christian memorial service meant it contained no visual elements. In contrast, our previous ancestral rites were full of symbolic artifacts and actions and few spoken words. Verbal expressions were dominant in our new memorial service.

Third, I came to be aware of what might be termed the "insufficiency" of the Christian memorial in honoring ancestors. Our Christian memorial service was meaningful in worshipping God and being attentive to God's will for us, but it did not seem to recognize or honor ancestors sufficiently during the service. We were not remembering and honoring their contributions to the family nor were we paying tribute to them.

Fourth, there was what I call a "shortage of dedication." My mother used to prepare various foods and other ritual objects from morning till night for the ritual table. My father and his sons showed great respect to our ancestors by bowing toward their photos. My family's attitudes toward our ancestors as expressed in the rite were expressions of sincerity, politeness, earnestness, and dedication. I felt these emotions had been diminishing in our Christian memorial services, and it was a great loss.

Underlying Motifs of the Ancestral Rite

I noted above the two main aspects of the Korean ancestral rite (Choi 1983, 89-91). First, I noted that the rites were religious and were regarded as "worship" of ancestral spirits. Second, I identified the rites' characteristic social nature. This second aspect of the rites points to filial piety (hyo), in that ancestors are honored, respected, and venerated by their descendants in the rites. Some Koreans so emphasize the social character of these rituals as to rule out an interpretation of them as true ancestor "worship." To these two dominant aspects I suggest adding a third dimension to the rites' motifthe psychological dimension. In so doing, I am noting the deep psychological and emotional attachment that descendants develop and deepen as a result

of performing the rites. In summary, I note that Korean ancestral rites embody and engender three major motifs: religious motifs, social motifs, and psychological motifs, and each of these three main motifs entail sub-motifs.

Traditional Korean ancestral rites are religious in that they presuppose that spirits of ancestors are still alive and present. Descendants venerate ancestors as living beings through the rites and reflect the belief that their ancestors may assist or harm their lives on earth. Thus, they seek blessings and protection from their ancestors by offering food and showing honor to them. Accordingly, the religious motifs of Korean ancestral rites include belief in ancestors as living spirits, veneration

May we not
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of ancestors, and anticipation of the ancestors bestowing blessings upon descendants. Kim (2007, 57) notes that rituals are used to affirm social orders in the Confucian view of how society should be structured, reflecting the fact that Korea has been greatly influenced by Confucianism over the centuries. Kwanguk Kim (1986, 126) draws attention to the fact that the rites recognize and affirm the special status of the eldest son. And it must be noted that women do not participate in this ceremony as such, but they prepare food for it.

The death-day rites end in family fellowship and a meal that promote family cohesion and solidarity, and one can

legitimately say that the social aspects of the rites include more than just honoring the ancestors and affirming relationship between ancestors and descendants. Instead, they also enhance family solidarity, and reinforce social positions in the family. Wi Jo Kang articulates the significant social meanings of ancestral rites in Korean life:

Thus, ancestor worship became a powerful institution in Korean life and culture. It was a sacred symbol in which all Koreans found meaning and purpose for their lives and the enhancement of their sense of belonging. Without both ancestor worship and family, Koreans lost the sense of meaning of their existence; but through the observance of these rites Koreans maintained the values of filial piety and loyalty which in turn strengthened family life and solidified the fabric of Korean society (1988, 74).

The ancestral rite is the channel through which Korean people express their psychological and emotional attachment to the dead, whose deaths they mourn and whose absence makes them sad. In this context, I have seen my mother missing my father who passed away about thirteen years ago. She has a feeling of sorrow and remorse for my father. On the other hand, my mother usually expresses her gratitude for my late father's commitment to our family. When Koreans remember and long for their late spouses, parents and grandparents, it's the practice of ancestral rites that allows the psychological elements of longing, gratitude, remorse, mourning, and remembrance to manifest in relation to the dead.

Articulating Christian Engagement with the Rite

In the preceding sections, I addressed the elements, procedure, and motifs of the Korean ancestral rite. In this section, I seek to identify a relevant Christian engagement with these rituals.

Multiple Facets of Ritual

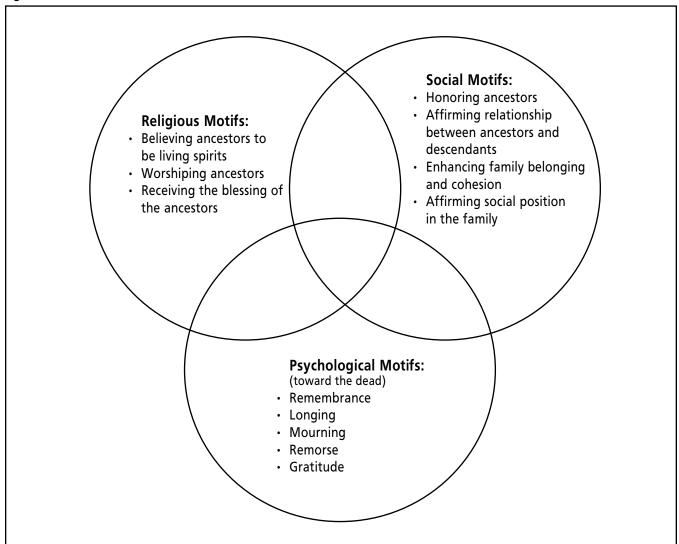
It is important to recognize the multidimensionality of Korean ancestral rites as they exemplify the social, cultural, personal and cosmic dimensions of rituals (see Hiebert, Shaw, and Tiénou 1999, 283-84). If we see ancestral rites only from a religious perspective, we will inevitably condemn the rites and exclude them from Christian life. But to come to terms with positive elements in these rites, Korean Protestants must also face the fact that we don't accept the belief that ancestors are present in the form of spirits in this world. Nevertheless, Korean ancestral rites embody other significant meanings that enrich Korean people's lives and social relationships. In abandoning these

traditional practices, we lose the opportunities through which Koreans may enjoy those social and psychological constituent parts which God's word and teachings may allow. At a minimum, criticism should be leveled only after careful study and discernment, for while traditional religious beliefs permeate human cultural practices, a way may be found to maintain socio-cultural values that are compatible with biblical teachings. As a matter of principle, we need to view these practices in their entirety and should not denounce a cultural practice as totally unacceptable simply because it contains unbiblical religious elements. If we do so, we lose the significant socio-cultural values of which the Bible may approve. I have portrayed the motifs of Korean ancestral

rites as displaying religious, social, and psychological levels. A Christian analysis of these rites requires us to denounce anti-biblical elements, while maintaining biblically affirmed elements in our practices. If we determine that there are elements that do not conflict with biblical teaching, may we Koreans not continue to enjoy our cultural heritage without fear we are compromising our faithfulness to God? I will carefully analyze Korean ancestral death-day rites in light of biblical teachings in the next section, but first let me summarize what Korean ancestral death-day rites entail:

 Religious Motifs: "worshiping" ancestors as living spirits who confer blessings on descendants.

Figure 3. Motifs of the Korean Ancestral Rite



- Social Motifs: honoring ancestors, which maintains relations between ancestors and descendants, deepens sentiments of belonging to a family and cohesion within the family, and affirms social positions in the family.
- 3. *Psychological Motifs:* remembering, longing, mourning, remorse, gratitude.

The question we must ask is *which* of these motifs are compatible with Christian life and teaching. (See Figure 3 on p. 123.)

A Critical Assessment for Evangelical Christian Practice

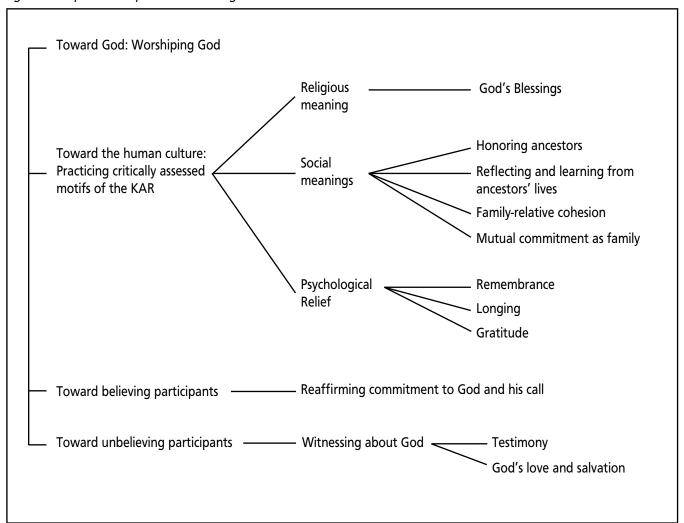
If I am correct, evangelical Christians reject traditional Korean ancestral rites because they entail "worship" of

ancestors and the use of symbolic objects and actions such as food, incense, candles, and prostration. As I noted earlier, on principle we should exclude elements incompatible with biblical teachings, while carefully discerning whether it is possible to maintain or transform elements that can be affirmed by the Bible. Paul Hiebert called this approach "critical contextualization" (1985, 186), an orientation that critically examines traditional cultural practices in light of the Bible, and creates new, contextualized Christian practices. To achieve this sort of critical contextualization, we need to deal with both (1) components and (2) manners of expressing requisite evangelical beliefs and practices in regard to ancestors.

Proposing Components for Evangelical Christian Practice

Evangelical Christian faith centers on the uniqueness of Jesus as Savior and the Bible as the ultimate norm for Christian faith and life. On this basis, evangelical Christians cannot accept believing in and worshiping ancestors as living spirits as practiced in the traditional Korean ancestral rites. The traditional Korean rites presuppose ancestral spirits moving between the afterlife world and this world, affecting their descendants' earthly lives. By contrast, evangelical Protestant faith holds that people go to eternity after their death and do not further affect the earthly world. This doctrine is exemplified in Luke 16:19-31, a story of Lazarus and a rich man that portrays the state of

Figure 4. Proposed Components for Evangelical Christian Practice



the dead as either at Abraham's side (in heaven) or in hell. In addition, the Bible nowhere teaches us to contact or seek help from the dead. Instead, the Bible guides believers to seek help from God alone (see, for example, Psalms 115:9–11; 121:1–8). Therefore, in my opinion, evangelical practice must renounce the elements of ancestral rites that amount to the worship of ancestors. Accordingly, again in my view, evangelical practice should not offer food to ancestors, because this action presumes the presence of ancestral spirits. In regards to a traditional Korean belief in ancestors' conferring blessings on descendants, evangelical Christians may instead ask for God's blessings.

The social and psychological motifs of the rite, however (that second tier of elements outlined above), do not contradict biblical norms. The Bible emphasizes, for example, the importance of honoring parents and elderly people (Ex. 20:12, Lev. 19:32, Matt. 15:4). Israelites in the Bible remembered and reflected on the lives of their ancestors (Ex. 4:5, Mark 12:26, Heb. 11:1–40). Therefore, it does not contradict biblical teaching to remember and honor ancestors. In regards to the social dimension of Korean ancestral rites, evangelical Christians may express their respect, honor, and gratitude to their ancestors without believing in or worshiping them as living spirits. Descendants may recall and reflect on their ancestors' care and dedication during their earthly lives. They may recognize the importance of learning their ancestors' lives and living harmoniously together. Some Protestant Christians use the photos of their ancestors to better recognize them. They can prepare food to eat together, thereby enhancing their fellowship and sense of mutual belonging.

In regard to our third motif, the *psy-chological* elements of Korean ancestral rites, participants may express their respect and gratitude for ancestors, for each generation receives much from previous generations. This is the positive

hey feel a Christian memorial service without symbols is insufficient, since their custom was to honor their ancestors by prostration.

element; in addition, they can be relieved from remorse and regret that they did not serve their ancestors as well as they should have during their lifetimes.

In this vein, a reformulated evangelical alternative to the traditional rites should focus on God, and the eventual goal of the practice should be to worship and thank God for what He did and does within the family. In addition, believing participants need to be reminded of their commitment to God and His call, while unbelieving relatives participating in Christian ancestral rites are given a witness to God. (See Figure 4 on p. 124.)

Proposing Ways to Express Evangelical Faith

Every religious faith is communicated in particular modes of expression. In this light, we need to devise proper ways to express and communicate the components of the evangelical Christian practice proposed in the preceding section. Each church tradition carries its unique forms of Christian expression. For instance, some churches conduct baptism by immersion while others by sprinkling. Catholics use a variety of symbols, arts, and images while Protestants seldom do so. Instead, Protestants use verbal and written language to express their faith, namely speaking, singing, and written words. They use auditory music rather than visual media, although this is changing. The four major methods of communicating the Christian faith among evangelicals are praising, praying, preaching, and teaching. In contrast, traditional Korean ancestral rites contain numerous symbols with few words.

When non-Christians become Christian, they may feel that the Christian memorial service without symbols is insufficient, since they were accustomed

to honor their ancestors by prostration, and they are not allowed to do so in the Protestant practice, because the second of the Ten Commandments in the Old Testament prohibits bowing down to or worshiping idols (Ex. 20:4-5). Rather than seeing prostration as worshiping the ancestors, however, would it be possible to conceive of prostration as a deeper expression of honor than spoken words? In this regard, might prostration be interpreted as a way of fulfilling what is demanded in the fifth of the Ten Commandments, that is to say, "to honor your father and your mother" (Ex. 20:12)? On New Year's Day, many Korean Christians honor their living parents by bowing to them. Could they honor their ancestors in the same way? Could we accept bowing as an expression of respect rather than worship? After all, bowing is portrayed in the Old and New Testament as paying respect, honor, and reverence to God, angels, or certain persons. In the Old Testament, people bow down to God (Gen. 24:52-53; 1 Chron. 29:20); to angels (Gen. 19:1; Josh. 5:14); to other gods (Num. 25:2; Deut. 17:3); and idols (Ex. 20:5); as well as to kings (2 Sam. 9:6; 1 Kings 1:23); to parents and elderly people (Gen. 33:6, 48:12, Ex. 18:7, Ruth 2:10); and to high ranking people (Gen. 42:6; Est. 3:2). The New Testament includes many occasions that people bow down to Jesus (Matt. 8:2, 9:18, 14:33, 15:25, 20:22; Mark 5:6; John 9:38). Other than to Jesus, Peter was bowed to by Cornelius (Acts 10:24). The Bible forbids bowing down to other gods or idols, but does not condemn bowing down to honor certain people or to worship God.

Can candles be used in an evangelical practice of ancestral rituals much as they are in Christian weddings? We might also consider using the photos of ancestors to help remember them and preparing flowers to commemorate them. In so doing we recall that Jung Young Lee (1988, 83) distinguishes between images and idols, pointing out that an image itself is not an idol and that an image becomes an idol only when it is an object of worship. Some Protestant churches allow these elements, but most Protestant churches are unfamiliar with the use of symbols and tend to think such practices wrong or unbiblical. Nevertheless, a Presbyterian Kyoungdong church allows the photo of the deceased, candles, incense, flowers, and bowing in their practice regarding ancestors (Kyoungdong Church Home Ceremony Research 1995, 33-42). Given these precedents, Korean evangelicals would need to define their biblical and theological perspective of symbols in general, as well as Korean traditional symbols in particular.

Current Protestant memorial services take the form of four basic elements: (1) prayer, (2) reading scriptures, (3) delivering a message, and (4) singing praise songs. Meanwhile, I recommend designing the components for the Protestant evangelical practice of ancestral rites in terms of four directions: toward God, toward Korean culture, toward believing participants, and toward unbelieving participants. As a result, the components would employ verbal prayers for God's blessings, reflecting on and learning from ancestors' lives, exhorting commitment to the family, articulating longing and gratitude, reaffirming commitment to God and His call, and witnessing about God. For family cohesion and solidarity, evangelical Christians can prepare food and eat together as is done in traditional Korean ancestral rites.

Rethinking Evangelical Attitudes toward Traditional Culture: Concluding Remarks

As we have seen, the ancestral rite remains significant for Koreans at religious, social, and psychological levels. I urge adopting a point of view that does not totally condemn the rite due to

some aspects that appear incompatible with the Bible. Instead, I suggest, we should recognize the rite's psycho-social importance and then develop evangelical practices that are both faithful to God and respect Korean culture.

I have suggested components and ways of expression for an evangelical alternative to the Korean ancestral death-day rite. The components were designed in four directions: toward God, toward Korean culture, toward believing participants, and toward unbelieving participants. They include the Protestant tradition of oral prayer, praise, and spoken words, as well as the possible use of symbols familiar in Korean society. Korean Protestantism, I have argued, needs to re-evaluate the place of symbols in its ecclesial practice.

We can honor our ancestors and solidify relationships with the family.

In the absence of such appropriate contextualization, many non-Christian Koreans judge that Protestants distance themselves from Korean culture and are reluctant to accept Christ if they have to turn their backs on their cultural heritage. Our commitment to God does not require us to abandon our human culture. Indeed, such rejection of traditional culture leads many Koreans to regard Christianity as unrelated to their own cultural ethos and roots, thereby rejecting Christianity as alien and irrelevant to their lives (Kim 2010, 424–25).

Yes, we must reject cultural elements that contradict biblical truth. But we can maintain aspects of cultural heritage that are compatible with the Bible. We honor and worship God, and we anticipate eternal life, but we also live in social relationship with others within history. Protestantism must demonstrate that it values our relationship with other people, as well as with God, and provides proper Christian mechanisms that fulfill such social relationships. In this regard, Eunjung Cha (1999, 122) points out that Korean Protestant worship services are insufficient to fulfill the role of rituals that connect individuals with a community and strengthen communal ties in their life situations. Conversion to Christian faith and living "in Christ" should not mean abandoning social relationships with non-Christian Koreans. On the contrary, we can maintain such relationships in biblically transforming ways. We can honor our ancestors and solidify social relationships in the family through an appropriate Christian alternative for ancestral practices, ultimately focusing on worshiping and glorifying God.

In this study, I have articulated that the Korean ancestral rite can be transformed in ways that offer glory to God and value Korean cultural heritage. When Korean evangelical Christians properly respond to traditional culture in biblical faithfulness and cultural relevance, they will both enjoy God's grace and retain their cultural heritage, making the Christian experience more meaningful and relevant to non-Christians in Korea. **JIFM**

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